

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE IALJS LITERARY JOURNALISM

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INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR LITERARY JOURNALISM STUDIES

OCTOBER 2020

DIFFERENT NEWSLETTER FOR DIFFERENT TIMES

A special issue on "Pandemic Pedagogy" along with IALJS news

By Kate McQueen
University of California, Santa Cruz
(U.S.A.)



EDITOR'S LETTER

You may notice that *Literary Journalism* looks a little different this issue. Like other scholarly and professional associations, IALJS is working hard to adapt to the many changes

and challenges of 2020.

This includes the postponement and rescheduling of our annual conference, the retirement of our association president, Tom Connery, and

the rapid transition to remote learning those of us in the classroom currently face.

So, in lieu of our usual October president's letter, our conference call, and our host city highlights, we've put together a special issue that focuses on "pandemic pedagogy," a project spearheaded by our incoming association president, Rob Alexander. Inside you'll also find the latest news on the 2021 IALJS conference and a new-book roundup, as well as essays in the history and practice of literary journalism.

I want to extend heartfelt thanks to the many association members who wrote articles for this issue. With your contributions, we're able to build community, encourage intellectual collaboration, and support each other's teaching even through this strange period of prolonged physical distance.

FUTURE IALJS CONFERENCE SITES

The following future IALJS convention venues are confirmed and/or planned:

Note: Dates and locations may change due to restrictions resulting from COVID-19.

IALJS-15: University of Copenhagen, Denmark, 20-22 May 2021.

IALJS-16: Universidad Alberto Hurtado, Santiago, Chile, 12-14 May 2022.

IALJS-17: University of Gdansk, Poland 19-21 May 2023.

IALJS-18: University of Technology Sydney, Australia, 11-13 May 2024.

IALJS-19: University of California, Irvine, U.S.A., 23-25 May 2025 (pending).

IALJS-20: Belgium, 15-17 May 2026 (pending).

IALJS-21: Brock University, St. Catharines, Canada, 21-23 May 2027 (pending).

IALJS-22: Lisbon, Portugal or Cape Town, South Africa, 13-15 May 2028 (pending).

In Case You Missed It

Be sure to check out the August 2020 special issue of *Literary Journalism Studies* focusing on lusophone literary journalism available at www.ialjs.org.

Literary Journalism Studies Vol. 12, No. 1, August 2020



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THE LETTERED CITY

How the Crónicas of Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora helped shape New Spain

By Sac-Nicté Calderón, Universidad Autónoma de Durango (México)



RESEARCH ESSAY

In Latin America, the *crónica* is an historical matter. Everything starts with the *Crónicas de Indias*, a group of texts written by conquerors, soldiers and evangelizers—such as Christopher Columbus and Hernán

Cortés—that describe their arrival in America and constitute a first period of syncretism. Those recently inaugurated and bordering cultural zones continue in the New Spanish Baroque. In this society, which functioned as a kaleidoscope due to its complexity and its mixture of festivals, traditions and worldviews,



Portrait of Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora

the figure of the Creole—people born and raised in New Spain, with Spanish ancestry—stands out as an example of a new way of inhabiting a territory. Here, the *crónica* emerged from the center of the political system and represented, for the Creoles, a search for independence and a representation of their political aspirations.

Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora is one of the clearest examples of the Creole intellectuality and its ambiguity.¹ In “*Alboroto y motín de los indios de México*,” a *crónica* written as if it were a letter, it is possible to observe both the duality of their class and that of society in general,² as well as “typical” moments in the life of the Creoles.

Sent to Madrid on August 30, 1692, this *crónica* narrates in depth a tumult caused by the sale of corn in Mexico City, after a year of lost crops and general discontent at the decisions of Viceroy Conde de Galve. To discuss it, it is important to remember that it is no longer a conqueror who writes about a land at the moment in which he is discovering it. Sigüenza is not a conqueror and he is not only a *cronista*, he is a Creole, an intellectual, and as such, his intentions go further than to relate a historical event.

Throughout the chronicle, Sigüenza y Góngora recounts, first, a series of events that are favorable for the viceroy, with the intention of influencing the public opinion of the court.³ Through the building of churches, granting missionaries to ecclesiastical companies, vacating bays and driving away pirates, Sigüenza formed the viceroy as a “sacred prince,” with great political qualities and religious fervor. In contrast, he blames the indigenous people and even

rejects his own scientific personality by insinuating that they had also received divine punishments. The favorable images did not justify only the viceroy but the entire system that controlled New Spain’s society. Presenting the image of a nation in progress at the beginning of the *crónica*, automatically caused the portrayal of barbarism of the natives to increase during the development of the story.

The *crónica* is not only partial but subjective⁴, as it is written from an essentially Creole vision. The key word in colonial times was “order.” This tumult between indigenous people and the citizens of New Spain not only worked against that order of New Spain, but it also had consequences for the class privileges of the Creoles and the project of a Creole nation that had begun to emerge in the middle of the previous century.

Sigüenza y Góngora wrote from the heart of the lettered city—a socio-political system used by intellectuals to construct discourses that validated imperial power in exchange for economic benefits, such as the possibility of studying—that emerged in the New Spain but still is present in Latin America. Ángel Rama explains that within the city there was always another one that “governed and led it,” an administrative headquarters that it was “not less walled but more aggressive”: the lettered city. This “protective ring of power and executor of its orders” consisted of a “doubly closed circuit, since it was born from the viceregal power and returned to it.” The role of Sigüenza y Góngora as an intellectual is thus maintained within the

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FROM THE CLASSROOM TO THE NEWSROOM

Thoughts on academic's return to professional journalism

By Miles Maguire, Oshkosh Examiner (U.S.A.)

At the beginning of 2018, Coroner Barry L. Busby was the most popular elected official in Winnebago County, Wisconsin. In November 2017 he had won his eighth full term with the highest vote total on the ballot, 97% of all those cast.

Much of his popularity could be traced to the retired police sergeant's grandfatherly manner and his high-profile involvement in two of the area's most difficult issues—teen suicide and drug overdoses.

Eight months later Busby resigned in disgrace.

His resignation came in response to a series of articles published on a website I operate, *oshkoshexaminer.com*. These stories showed a different side of

the coroner, a man who crudely harassed female colleagues, drank heavily, took credit for other people's work and repeatedly looked for ways to maximize his personal gain from his public position.

The stories got started with a tip from a local citizen. That person had become aware that certain county officials had grown so frustrated with Busby's job performance that one of them had approached the local daily, *The Oshkosh Northwestern*, and asked it to investigate. Because of budget cutbacks at the Gannett-owned *Northwestern*, however, its staff was unable to devote the necessary resources to this investigation.

The Busby stories made plain to me the dangers of letting local journalism fall into decline. *The Oshkosh Examiner* was

not the only news outlet that covered Busby, but it was the first on the story and broke all of the major developments. More than one county official told me later that without the *Examiner*, Busby would likely still be in office, earning a \$72,000 a year salary that he didn't deserve.

Let me be clear—the reporting I did was no feat of dramatic, Woodward-and-Bernstein-style sleuthing. It was just basic blocking and tackling, making

phone calls and filing public records requests. I did not have to woo reluctant sources—they came out of the woodwork once they heard what I was writing about.

When I wrote these stories, I was a full-time professor of journalism, keeping my hand in local journalism by running my website and freelancing for a weekly newspaper. For me the reporting was partly a public service and partly a hobby. As I used to tell students in the syllabus for my reporting class:

Reporting is, without a doubt, the best job in the world.

Reporters get not just a front row seat on history but also the opportunity to get up from that seat and affect history. And then, when they want, they get to sit back down.

Reporters get treated like royalty, sometimes; they also get treated like trash. Reporters get to travel to the top of the town, and they also get to see life's underside. Reporters get to meet the most fascinating people in the world. Reporters get to ask intimate, inappropriate questions, and no matter how boorish their behavior they almost always get invited back.

Ultimately Busby's resignation was a major contributor to my own resignation from my position at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh. Last December, the school's chancellor announced that as a cost-saving measure, he was offering a modest incentive payment (half a year's pay) to older staff members who would resign.

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REFLECTIVE
ESSAY

Oshkosh Examiner

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About the Oshkosh Examiner

The Oshkosh Examiner works to bring you local facts that matter so that you can be smarter about your community.

We want you to know about decisions and events before they happen, which means that you can be involved while there is still time to make a difference.

We focus on scoops—news that hasn't been reported elsewhere—and on investigative and explanatory stories that go far beyond old headlines to make sense of things you may have already heard. We also follow stories that are still important but may have faded from mainstream coverage.

The founder of the Oshkosh Examiner is Miles Maguire, whose journalism career has taken him from his native Baltimore to editorial and reporting positions in New York, Washington and Milwaukee. For more than 20 years he taught journalism at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh and during that time published a textbook on reporting.

The work that is presented here is based on an approach to journalism that emphasizes careful, methodical fact gathering as a way of assuring a high degree of credibility. Our goal is to give you information that may surprise you but that you can rely on and make decisions on.

If you want to understand what is happening in your community, the Oshkosh Examiner is the way to stay ahead of the news curve.

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The Oshkosh Examiner works to bring you local facts that matter so that you can be smarter about your community.

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EVENTS AND CALLS

**Festival of Women Writers and Journalists:
A Centenary Celebration of Time and Tide**
WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 11, 2020

An online event marking the centenary of feminist magazine *Time and Tide*, exploring the status of women in the media and publishing landscape today in conversation with influential female journalists, editors, and publishers, including Polly Toynbee of the *Guardian* and Nicola Beauman of Persephone Books.

The event will comprise two hour-long panels, one on "Women, Politics, and the Press" and another on "Women, Publishing, and the Literary Press."

More information can be found at timeandtidemagazine.org or by emailing Project Officer Dr Eleanor Reed (Eleanor.Reed@ntu.ac.uk).

Call for Papers

Journal of European Periodical Studies
"I Read It in a Magazine": The Changing Roles of Literary Periodicals, 1960–2020
DEADLINE: DECEMBER 1, 2020

The aim of the special issue is to offer a view of the development and roles of the literary periodical in several European (not only Anglophone) cultures over the past sixty years.

The standard length of an academic essay is between 5,000 and 8,000 words, including notes and bibliography. Please send your proposal to the guest-editors: Wolfgang Görtzschacher (University of Salzburg, Wolfgang.Goertschacher@sbg.ac.at) and David Malcolm (University of Warsaw, dmalcolm.pl@gmail.com).

More information can be found at ojs.ugent.be/jeps

2021 IALJS CONFERENCE UPDATE

Recommendations from our conference participant survey

By Rob Alexander, Brock University (Canada),

Tobias Eberwein, Austrian Academy of Sciences (Austria),

Lindsay Morton, Pacific Union College (U.S.A.)

The 2021 IALJS Conference will be based almost entirely on the program for the postponed 2020 Copenhagen conference, although the actual final format of this meeting will not be determined until early January 2021.

The decision to stick with the existing program followed a July survey of participants—both panelists and moderators—to find out who would be willing to present at the 2021 conference, the paper they were scheduled to give in 2020, or whether a new call for papers would be necessary.

Respondents overwhelmingly favored sticking with their original submissions, with 87.8% of the survey's 77 respondents preferring that option.

The survey also found near-unanimous support among respondents for the idea of holding a Conference in 2021, although the form that meeting should take remains less clear.

A majority of participants favors the option of a face-to-face meeting in Copenhagen. At the same time, a considerable number of presenters stressed that they will not be able to attend

the conference in person due to travel restrictions and cuts to travel budgets at many universities.

Many colleagues from Australia, for example, are already sure that international travel will be impossible for them next May, and for many others, the situation remains unclear, although they would hope to come, if possible.

As a result of this feedback, the IALJS Executive Committee is now considering two options for the 2021 Conference.

Option One: In this preferred scenario, the conference will take the form of a hybrid event with a core group of participants meeting in person while those who cannot be there will join virtually. This option assumes such gatherings will be permitted by the University of Copenhagen at that time.

Option Two: If a face-to-face conference is not possible, even for a core group, the meeting will be held virtually by a yet-to-be determined online host.

The IALJS Executive Committee expects to make a decision in early January 2021.



RETURN TO THE NEWSROOM

Continued from Page 3

It was an offer I couldn't refuse, and so I decided to leave academe and return to the trenches of local journalism, full time and with an eye toward turning it into a paying proposition.

For those of you who may be considering a similar move, I can give you a couple of thoughts about the transition.

First, working as a reporter on your own website is really a double job. There is all the journalistic work of finding stories, writing them, taking photographs and recording audio or video. But that is just the half of it. At the same time, you have to be fully occupied in marketing, social media, technological troubleshooting. My plan is to put my

website on a subscription basis by the beginning of the year, and that's when financial accounting will also come into the picture.

The second thing to know is that there is a growing movement across the country to try to build back a local news infrastructure. Big technology companies like Google and Facebook are trying to get in on this action, but there is also a nonprofit association that works to help local news publishers learn from the successes (and mistakes) of others. The group is called LION Publishers, for Local Independent Online News. I have found it to be a very valuable resource, and I am currently taking my second, no-cost seminar from LION. The first one was on budget planning and this one is on product

design. If you should decide to become part of this effort, you will find a lot of company and a supportive community.

Finally, you may not get paid, but you will find rewards. I have put a tremendous amount of work into the *Oshkosh Examiner* with very little financial return so far. But I am quite confident that leaving academe was the right thing to do, especially right now. There is so much work to do, and there are so many opportunities to find and do great stories. I get anonymous tips. I get heartfelt pleas to look into things like the systemic racism that lingers in our local schools. And I get a lot of thank-yous, even from strangers on the street. It's enough to restore your faith in people, and in their appreciation for the importance of journalism.

THE LETTERED CITY

Continued from Page 2

lettered city, in which "intellectuals not only serve a power, they are also owners of a power."⁴ In other words, they not only follow orders, but are fully aware of the operation of the system and the scope of the messages they send.

*It is from the very heart of the lettered city that the intellect of the Creole from New Spain subversively emerges, emerging as a subject of modernity who had found in modern thought an instrument in which he channels and legitimizes his nation project.*⁵

The *crónica* aims not only to protect the viceroy, but to remove any political intention from the tumult, to present it as a product of the nature of the "drunken Indians" and "ungrateful people." Sigüenza y Góngora portrayed the indigenous past as something almost mythological, but did not see the indigenous people of his present in the same way. He portrays them as a formless mass, full of addictions, with which they



Juan Antonio Prado, "La Plaza Mayor, MÉXICO" (1769)

"offered souls to the devil," especially in two geographical spaces that represented indigenous decadence: the pulquería and the Baratillo market. The history of their ancestors already belonged symbolically to the Creoles: now, the indigenous people were beings who only shouted to scandalize society.

Sigüenza y Góngora represents a new perspective and the emergence of rational thought in the viceregal era as much as he also represents a Creole who defends, with his intellectual weapons

and his position, from the lettered city, the system that protects him.

NOTES

¹ Leonard, I. . *Don Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, un sabio mexicano del siglo XVII*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, (1984): 290. Irving Leonard named "rudimentary journalism" and "vivid stories" to the contemporary *crónica* of Sigüenza.

² The order / chaos contrasts are a constant in the *crónica*, and the "people" always appear as the generator of conflicts, not only because their ungrateful nature dictates it that way, but because for Sigüenza all kind of addictions, especially pulque, help them foster greater disorder

³ Lorente, A. *La prosa de Sigüenza y Góngora y la formación de la conciencia criolla mexicana*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica (1996): 144.

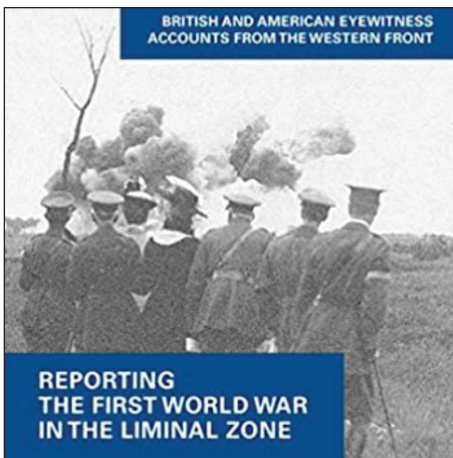
⁴ Rama, A. *La ciudad letrada*. Montevideo: Arca, (1998): 36.

⁵ Rivera, S. En defensa de la nación criolla: Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora y el Alboroto y motín de los indios de México. *Literatura Mexicana* 20 (2009): 5-31.

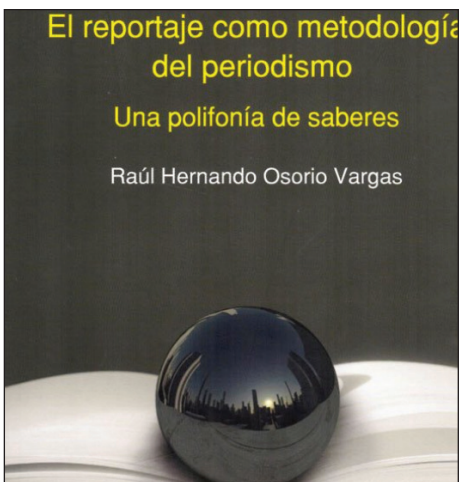
LITERARY JOURNALISM'S NEW-BOOK ROUNDUP

Since the association's founding in 2006, IALJS members have been incredibly productive. We're launching this new section—the New Book Round-Up—to give our readers a better sense of the breadth and depth of the emerging work in our field. For this issue, we've pulled together titles on literary journalism or literary journalism-adjacent topics written by our association members and published in 2018 and 2019. Going forward, we'll showcase titles from 2020 and beyond. If your recently published book hasn't yet been included and you'd like it to be, please email newsletter editor Kate McQueen at kamcquee@ucsc.edu. We welcome member-written titles in all languages and genres.

Single-Author Monographs



Reporting The First World War in the Liminal Zone, by Sara Prieto (*Palgrave Macmillan*). This book explores war reportage based on British and American authors' experiences at the Western Front, from the summer of 1914 to the Armistice in November 1918. The texts under discussion are situated in the 'liminal zone,' written in the middle of a transitional period, half-way between two radically different literary styles: the romantic and idealising ante bellum tradition, and the cynical and disillusioned modernist school of writing. They are also the product of the various stages of a physical and moral journey which took authors into the fantastic albeit nightmarish world of the Western Front, where their understanding of reality was transformed beyond anything they could have anticipated.



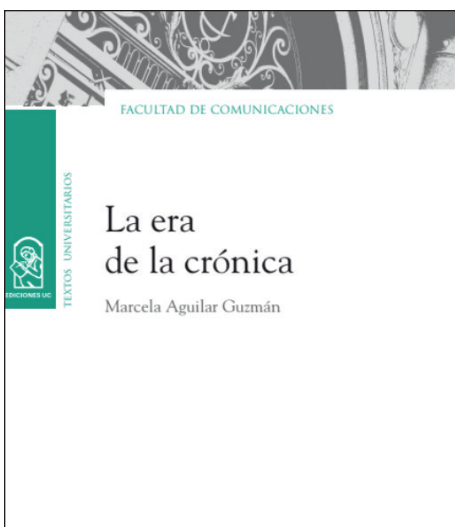
El reportaje como metodología del periodismo. Una polifonía de saberes, by Raúl Hernando Osorio Vargas (*Editorial Universidad de Antioquia*). *Reportage as a Methodology of Journalism: A Polyphony of Knowledge* examines how journalism leads, guides, interprets, explains, teaches and above all tries deeply to understand the world through reportage. It expands research on reportage by focusing on its use in Latin America, in particular Brazil and Colombia. Taking a historical approach, the book explores methods on which some journalists relied for the creation of *crónicas* and reportages. The project is committed to a professionalization of journalism that cultivates freedom of thought, fundamental to continue listening to the plurality of nuances about everyday life. Its unique focus on methodology over genre opens new theoretical perspectives in literary journalism.



At the Fault Line: Writing White in South African Literary Journalism, by Claire Scott (*University Of KwaZulu-Natal Press*). Social identities within post-apartheid South Africa remain highly contested with issues of race and racism often dominating the national discourse. In order to find their place within the national narrative, white South Africans need to re-think their stories, re-define their positions in society, and re-imagine their own narratives of identity and belonging. By exploring whiteness and white identity through the lens of literary journalism, this book reflects on ways in which writers like Rian Malan, Antjie Krog, Jonny Steinberg and Kevin Bloom use the uncertainties and contradictions inherent in this genre to reveal the complexities of white identity formation and negotiation within contemporary South Africa.



Provoking the Press: (MORE) Magazine and the Crisis of Confidence in American Journalism, by Kevin M. Lerner (*University of Missouri*). In the early 1970s, a new wave of journalists grew increasingly frustrated by the limitations of traditional notions of objectivity in news writing and began to push back against convention, turning their eyes on the press itself. Two such journalists, J. Anthony Lukas and Richard Pollak, founded a journalism review called (MORE) in 1971, which covered the press with a critical attitude that blended seriousness and satire. In its eight years, the review considered and questioned the mainstream press's coverage of explosive stories of the decade. In telling the story of (MORE) and its legacy, Kevin Lerner explores the power of criticism to reform and guide the institutions of the press and, in turn, influence public discourse.



La era de la crónica, by Marcela Aguilar Guzmán (*Textos Universitarios*). “An editor is much more likely to ask you for two thousand words about crónica than to publish a two-thousand-word crónica,” Martín Caparrós declared in 2016. Enthusiasm reached a high point in 2012, when important international publishers launched *crónica* anthologies. Latin America spoke of its distinctive journalistic form, rooted in stories of its discovery and conquest, which found a unique way of telling reality, while elsewhere the newspaper industry began to crumble. Does the so-called new Latin American *crónica* really have a distinctive stamp? This book, *The Era of the Crónica*, answers the question through an analysis that confronts what is said about the current Latin American *crónica* with what in fact it is. It’s an unprecedented approach to the most important phenomenon of Latin American journalism in the last thirty years.



The **Storytelling** Movement in American Print Journalism

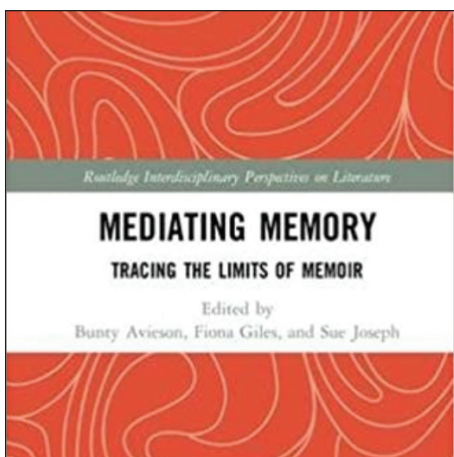
Thomas R. Schmidt

Rewriting the Newspaper: The Storytelling Movement in American Print Journalism, by *Thomas R. Schmidt* (*University of Missouri*). Between the 1970s and the 1990s, American journalists began telling the news by telling stories. They borrowed narrative techniques, transforming sources into characters, events into plots, and their own work from stenography to anthropology. It was a paradigmatic shift in toward narrative journalism and a new culture of news, propelled by the storytelling movement. Thomas Schmidt analyzes the expansion of narrative journalism and the corresponding institutional changes in the American newspaper industry in the last quarter of the twentieth century. In doing so, he offers the first institutionally situated history of narrative journalism's evolution from the New Journalism of the 1960s to long-form literary journalism in the 1990s.

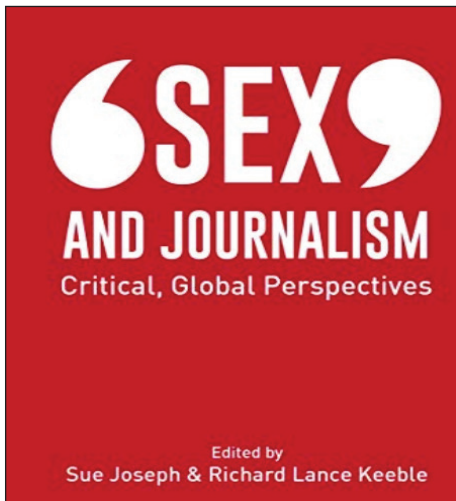
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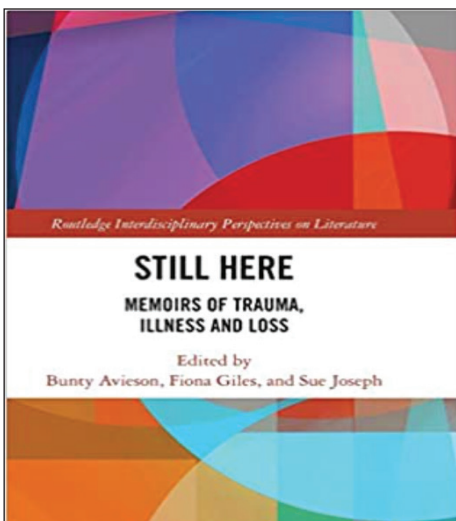
Fear and Loathing Worldwide: Gonzo Journalism Beyond Hunter S. Thompson, edited by *Robert Alexander and Christine Isager* (*Bloomsbury Academic*). For more than 40 years, the radically subjective style of participatory journalism known as Gonzo has been inextricably associated with the American writer Hunter S. Thompson. Around the world, however, other journalists approach unconventional material in risky ways, placing themselves in the middle of off-beat stories, and relate those accounts in the supercharged rhetoric of Gonzo. In *Fear and Loathing Worldwide*, scholars from fourteen countries discuss writers from Europe, the Americas, Africa and Australia, whose work bears the traces of the mutant Gonzo gene. In each chapter, "Gonzo" emerges as a powerful but unstable signifier, read and practiced with different accents and emphases in the various contexts in which it has erupted.



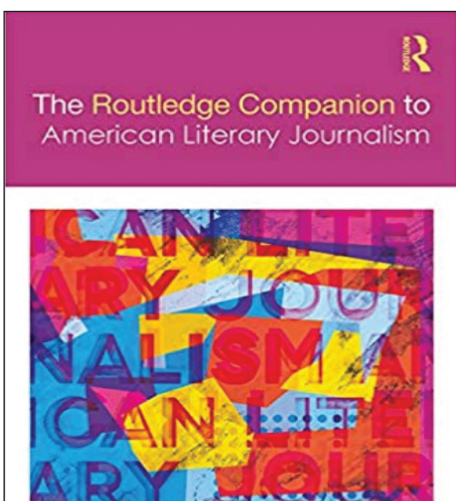
Mediating Memory: Tracing the Limits of Memoir, edited by *Bunty Avieson, Fiona Giles, and Sue Joseph* (*Routledge*). The argument has been made that memoir reflects and augments the narcissistic tendencies of our neo-liberal age. This collection challenges and dismantles that assumption. Focusing on the history, theory and practice of memoir writing, editors Bunty Avieson, Fiona Giles and Sue Joseph provide a thorough and cutting-edge examination of memoir through the lenses of ethics, practice and innovation. By investigating memoir across cultural boundaries, in its various guises, and tracing its limits, the editors convincingly demonstrate the plurality of ways in which memoir is helping us make sense of who we are, who we were and the influences that shape us along the way.



Sex and Journalism: Critical, Global Perspectives, edited by Sue Joseph and Richard Keeble (*Bite-Sized Books*). Paradoxically, while sex is everywhere in the media, the research into the coverage of sexuality by journalists is seriously marginalised in the academy. The opening section of this volume provides two important overviews by Belinda Middleweek and Matthew Ricketson. The second section carries case studies by an international group of journalists-turned-academics. Subjects include: reporters who dare to appropriate normally pejorative terms such as ‘slut’ and ‘sex object’ to promote progressive notions about gender and sexuality; the ethics of Gay Talese’s *The Voyeur’s Motel*; a group of prostitutes in Mexico who turned to journalism to tell their stories; the coverage of homosexuality in 1980s Portugal; and how a television investigation disrupted consent laws in New South Wales, Australia.



Still Here: Memoirs of Trauma, Illness and Loss, edited by Bunty Avieson, Fiona Giles, and Sue Joseph (*Routledge*). This book explores the range of memoirs focusing on illness, death, loss, displacement, and other experiences of trauma. From Walt Whitman’s Civil War diaries to kitchen table survivor storytelling following Hurricane Katrina, from social media posts from a refugee detention centre, to poetry by exiles fleeing war zones, the collection investigates trauma memoir writing as healing, as documentation of suffering and disability, and as political activism. The editors have brought together this scholarly collection as a sequel to their earlier *Mediating Memory* (*Routledge* 2018), providing a closer look at the specific concerns of trauma memoir, including conflict and intergenerational trauma; the therapeutic potential and risks of trauma life writing; its ethical challenges; and trauma memoir giving voice to minority experiences.



The Routledge Companion to American Literary Journalism, Edited by William E. Dow and Roberta S. Maguire (*Routledge*). Taking a thematic approach, this new companion provides an interdisciplinary, cross-cultural, and international study of American literary journalism. From the work of Frederick Douglass and Walt Whitman to that of Joan Didion and Dorothy Parker, literary journalism is a genre that both reveals and shapes American history and identity. This volume not only calls attention to literary journalism as a distinctive genre but also provides a critical foundation for future scholarship. It brings together cutting-edge research from literary journalism scholars, examining historical perspectives; themes, venues, and genres across time; theoretical approaches and disciplinary intersections; and new directions for scholarly inquiry.

SPECIAL SECTION

PANDEMIC PEDAGOGY

TEACHING IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

Overcoming barriers and adapting to the “new normal”

By Robert Alexander, Brock University (Canada)

“Close, prolonged, personal contact”¹ is the essence of literary journalism. It is also, unfortunately, one of the most common ways the virus responsible for COVID-19 is spread.

It’s hard to imagine an idea more hostile to literary journalism than “physical distancing.” The genre derives its unique character and truths from its writers’ extended immersion in the sights, sounds, and feel of the lives and worlds of their subjects. While it is unlikely that practitioners will be overly daunted by the threat of COVID-19, it is undeniable that those *teaching* the subject are today confronting special challenges, some formidable. How to teach “intimate journalism” in a pandemic?

I put that question to IALJS members several months back. Within hours, the responses began arriving in my inbox. Some were blunt: You can’t. At least not in the old way. But there are other ways and the respondents all offered inventive strategies for making the most of this bad situation, even sketching out strategies for turning obstacles unthinkable before the calendar flipped over to 2020 into opportunities to view and practice literary journalism in new ways.

Literary journalism has always been about overcoming barriers, most obviously in matters of gaining extended access to sources. With COVID-19, however, that particular constraint got ratcheted a few notches tighter. The Internet has been an obvious boon. Even

so, after a few exhausting hours confined to our little Zoom cells, forsaking “being there” for “staying here,” the fancy tech starts feeling like something rigged up out of tin cans and string.

In these pages, though, you’ll find stories of members adapting to the new abnormal and doing so in ways that open fresh avenues for post-COVID pedagogies. Forced by circumstances, the writers here share their discoveries of new sources

It’s hard to imagine an idea more
hostile to literary journalism than
“physical distancing.”

for stories – the self! –, of new ways of reporting – the phone! –, of neglected aspects of style and craft -- the power of the well-placed hyphen! – and, through a pedagogy fitted to the pace of “slow journalism,” of the restorative power of pausing to actually read some of the most instructive and entertaining works in the genre.

Along with accounts of the abrupt pivot many were forced to make in the early days of the pandemic and tales of students rising to the occasion, you’ll find here practical hints about technology and class housekeeping, suggestions for readings and assignments, as well as reminders of the importance of human

connection in this time of enforced distancing.

Whenever we return to whatever it is to which we return, these lessons are not likely to be forgotten. It will be a great day when we are finally able to turn the page on this mess, but when we do, we’ll probably be changed, perhaps in ways we won’t fully recognize, but so too will be our teaching and quite possibly our subject. The stories here hint at some of these new directions.

I’d like to thank everyone who contributed so thoughtfully, enthusiastically, and generously to my call for submissions. You’ve produced a box of tools for an urgent DIY project few of us thought we’d ever be facing. Thanks to you, we will be confronting it a little bit less alone.

I’d like also to thank my editorial assistant Heather Osborne who coordinated much of this effort and the Office of the Dean of Humanities, Brock University for its support for this project.

NOTES

¹Government of Canada, “Coronavirus disease (COVID-19): Prevention and risks.” <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/prevention-risks.html#h> (accessed June 12, 2020).

Robert Alexander is Associate Professor of English at Brock University, Ontario. With Christine Isager, he is the editor of Fear and Loathing Worldwide: Gonzo Journalism Beyond Hunter S. Thompson (Bloomsbury, 2018).



INTRODUCTION

TECHNOLOGY AND TEACHING TACTICS

Planning new strategies to maximize good journalism and student safety

By Robert Boynton, New York University (U.S.A.)

If intimacy gives literary journalism its advantage, I sometimes wonder whether we shouldn't just join professional sports, and suspend the "season" until the pandemic is over. Can you imagine Lillian Ross or Joan Didion practicing what Gay Talese once called "the fine art of hanging out" via Zoom? I can't. Have you noticed a certain reportorial shallowness creeping into the work of even some of the best writers in the (very few) quality magazines left? I have.

But of course literary journalism, and the world, won't pause, and neither will our students. In fact, the Literary Reportage program I run at NYU has its largest incoming class ever (perhaps partly due to our switching the degree from an MA to an MFA). Even though I will be teaching my courses (Introduction to Literary Reportage, Undergraduate Honors) in person for now, I have no idea how long that will last. And even though

they are listed as taking place "in person," several students will be attending from their homes, via Zoom.

What will I do differently? First, I'm integrating more audio and video into the courses, especially to involve remote students, some of whom are in time zones that make participating in real time difficult. I'm using a program called "VoiceThread," which enables them to comment on and answer questions about podcasts and films I post.

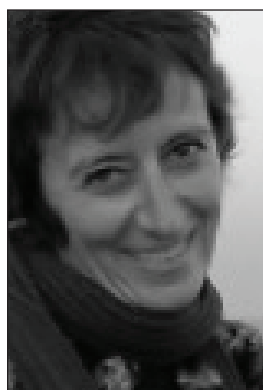
Second, I'm shortening the classes because nobody can use Zoom for two hours without sustaining a brain injury. What will I do with the "extra" time? I've always admired the British tutorial system, and plan to try a version of it bi-weekly, one-on-one meetings, during which we go over their assignments via Zoom. Third, my students will use excellent audio software to do their audio assignments remotely. If you can't get physically close in a safe setting, it isn't worth taking the

risk. Zencast records each end of an interview separately, so the audio files are high quality. I'm sure everything won't go smoothly, but we have to try to be creative as we balance safety and genuine journalism.



ESSAY

Robert Boynton teaches journalism at NYU and is the author of *The New New Journalism* (2006) and *The Invitation-Only Zone* (2016).



ESSAY

It is March 16, a mere five months ago to the day, as I write. Week 2 of semester 1, down here in Australia. It is still warm, sometimes even hot, residual summer heat permeating its way into early autumn days. And our VC announces—teaching must

PAUSE, THEN PIVOT

Reflecting on our role as anchors for students in the tempest

By Sue Joseph, University of Technology Sydney (Australia)

moment to catch your breath.

A rest perhaps.

And then this: pivot.

Another Late Middle English noun, derived from French, meaning a pin or point that moves. But it is the verb, dating from the mid-19th century, which stealthily creeps into our lexicon in early 2020. Pivot—to turn or rotate, as if on a hinge. Again, sounds quite gentle; non-rushed; perhaps even balletic.

Swinging on a hinge.

Seemingly, putting them together—"pausing" in order to "pivot" online—negates any notion of gentleness or rest. Obversely, the counterpoint is true—there is almost a violence to our

work that week, and weeks to come; to get it done; to get through it.

The pressure.

How the atmosphere is fuggy with moisture on hot, hot westerly days here on the Eastern Seaboard of Australia. The air heavy; no relief. Moving through it is an effort.

That's how it feels, creating this new learning world. Endless pressure, everywhere.

Our one-week "pause" at UTS means a mad scramble to convert all materials, to source online-adept materials, to reimagine all materials, to "pivot" to

"pause" for a week.

Pause.

A Middle English noun from the Latin *pausa*, meaning to stop. A short break. To stop or linger. It sounds quite calm; something to look forward to; a

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PAUSE, THEN PIVOT

Continued from previous page

online teaching. It is like a mini-cyclone blows through my home and is trapped inside, lingering and swirling a while, before sweeping away my usually calm and nourishing work day and space, tried and tested, the aftermath resembling an unfamiliar, exotic world.

Lockdown.

Quick, rapid-fire online trainings in Zoom: how to share screens, breakout rooms, record, chat. Email bombardment from middle management; how to do this; where to find that; some vague, some clear, some obtuse instructions. Everybody scrabbling to keep up. Another online training. Desperate emails from students.

Recording lectures; rewriting subject outlines; redesigning learning platforms. Desperate emails to each other. Hilarious texts to each other, attempting dark humour. Another online training. Wait—lockdown. Students unable to go out and interview subjects for their profile assignment; phone and online interviews completely inadequate for this creative non-fiction subject—observation, scene recreation and a touch of immersion are necessary.

Pivot. Pivot. Pivot.

So an assessment rewrite—a piece of memoir. Inward looking; writing memories; opening up personal spaces for peer reviewing—this subjective space always fraught. Often with memoir comes trauma; explicitly entwined. Be vigilant. Remember: give counselling services' advice and contacts. Stay vigilant; minimise harm.

And then, class.

Twenty-eight faces, staring at me, virtually, in my small study. I discover a strange intimacy in the Zoom classroom. Somehow, engaging with disembodied faces creates a peculiarly personal space. But it is exhausting, and I still cannot work out why, sitting at my desk in my ergonomic chair. None of us can work out why, the Zoom fatigue dogging our days.

Flipped classrooms, usually made up of field trips to idiosyncratic corners of Sydney as writing exercises become virtual assignments—the Sydney Writer's Festival a favourite Autumn excursion. This year,

it is cancelled, but not completely—it becomes virtual, uploading podcast after podcast, an extraordinary repository of extraordinary writers from all around the world. Our very own Alison Whittaker delivers the opening keynote and I use this, accompanied by an angry essay she writes in *Meanjin*, one of Australia's oldest literary magazines. Listen and think and write. That is their assignment. Reflect; dig deep. Respond to her passion; to her broiling anger.

And they do. The students. Not as entertaining as a day out at the SWF, but still, a taste; a shape of it. It is something. It is something, different. Rich. Their writing crackles off the page.

Annual on-campus "intensive" classes, conflating three weeks into the one day, enable me to travel the world in May and meet the IALJS community in whatever country we are assembling; much needed nourishment for the heart and soul. In March, thinking perhaps this global pandemic is a blip and Copenhagen will go ahead, I schedule these intensives for my two classes.

And of course, COVID is no blip; so, no Copenhagen.

But the intensives are still scheduled. So how to run eight hours' worth of content and class time on Zoom? Twice—two classes. I decide to attack it as an experiment—if we crash and burn, so be it. Extraordinary circumstances.

One of my postgraduates must return home to Germany before Australian borders snap shut. A mad dash for her; her parting comment: it is essential she completes the subject; she is committed to continue. She makes it as far as London, and is locked down.

What to do?—massive time differences between Sydney and London—our 9am to 5pm Intensive class shifts to 12noon to 8pm; she assures me she will get up at 5am and join in.

She does.

We gather together on Zoom at 12 noon. Presentations are scheduled throughout the day—students are prepared to discuss a writing problem and we brainstorm it to resolution; a lecture on memoir, and discussion. Thirty minute flash writing exercises, mics off; cameras on—they write fragments

of their assessment, and post it online; we workshop in break out rooms; then together.

Two coffee breaks for 15 minutes, and a half-hour lunch break.

There is another flash writing half hour—mics off; cameras on; more workshoping. We listen together to a Jeanette Winterson podcast, a miraculous reading from her memoir. We wrap up with a trouble-shooting session—questions and queries about final assessment work answered.

We spend eight hours peering at each other through our computers, and it feels like two; it is an excellent day. Productive, collegial and gracious.

And still I sit in my chair in my cosy study in my home by the water on the NSW Central Coast, an hour north of Sydney. I know everyone is enduring some version of the above, from different corners of the globe. And I know the situation in Australia is so much better, easier, more manageable than other countries where colleagues are facing the same pedagogical complexities but poised inside harsher economic, social, political and demographic confluences.

The sky is huge and blue, and clear, here in Australia, and the water flashes under the low slung winter sun. There is birdsong—two local Butcher Birds and a cavalcade of kookaburras—and mountains and trees and wildness all around. It is always captivating.

And I am grateful for my home, my students and my job.

In conclusion, one more definition for you—another deeper meaning of the word "pivot": when not talking about a type of swivelling movement, you can use pivot to mean the one central thing that something depends upon. Or rather, "someone" depends upon—for our students, in this ambiguous and erratic time, I figure that is us, their teachers. And we must never forget the honour in that.

Any effort is worth this.

A journalist for more than forty years, Sue Joseph (PhD) began working as an academic, at the University of Technology Sydney in 1997. She is currently Joint Editor of Ethical Space: The International Journal of Communication Ethics.

HANGING OUT: IT'S JUST NOT THE SAME ONLINE

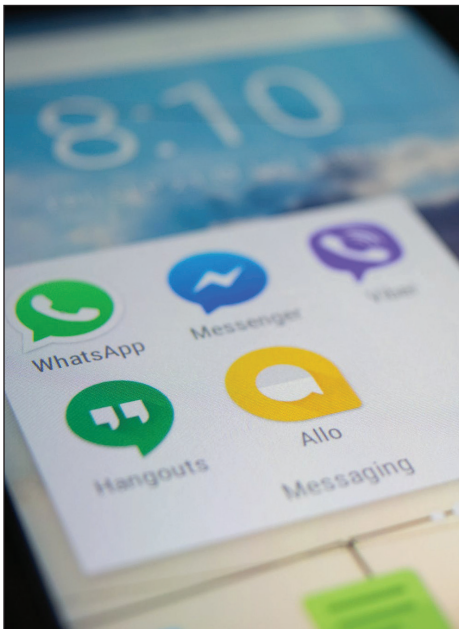
Remote teaching solutions as friend or foe; only time will tell

By Bill Reynolds, Ryerson University (Canada)

The type of journalism we teach—writing long narrative stories—depends more or less on Gay Talese's methodology of putting in the hanging-out time in order to understand character and capture scene material. I've been developing a three-draft model for a few years to help students learn how to do this kind of immersion.

So, five interviews and 10 research sources for first draft; 10 interviews and 20 research sources for second draft; and 15 interviews and 30 research sources for third draft. Students usually panic about where in hell they're going to find interviews 11 through 15. They relax a little when I tell them that every interview (or hang-out session) with your main character/source (or characters/sources) counts as an interview. Overall, this is a model I've been having some success with.

So, great, I'm just getting my formula for teaching LJ down and along comes the pandemic. I saw COVID-19 immediately as a lethal threat not only to human beings, but also to literary journalism. Back in mid-March,



everything I had built up vaporized. I had to restructure the assignments (two drafts, not three) and the grading system (structure chart worth 10 percent, not five per cent; draft two worth 25 percent, not 15 percent). And I had extended the deadline for draft two by a month—from March 25 to April 25. And I had to preach the gospel of learning (or re-learning) how to use the telephone.

The problem with that advice, at that particular time, was that everyone was losing their minds in the lockdown phase. Sources simply were not calling my feature writers back. Fortunately, by scaling back and waiting out what I'll call the "Total Freak-out Phase," sources slowly reemerged.

Still, some obstacles were difficult to surmount. For example, one student, who happened to be reporting on and writing about public libraries vs. trans rights, a hot issue in Canada, found that Vancouver Public Library workers would not want comment on anything other than COVID-19. It became impossible to develop a national perspective, which would make the story more attractive to a publication like the *Walrus*.

Another student had to drop his feature altogether because the scheduled hanging-out time with his main source evaporated. Fortunately, the student had already done a ton of interviewing and research for his Master's thesis, projected to be a long and major piece of literary journalism, so he wrote that up for my class and switched his abandoned project to Fall 2020/Winter 2021, gambling that by then we'll have figured sufficient workarounds to the pandemic.

I had to teach the last four weeks of the Winter 2020 semester online. Already knowing my first-year graduate students—their expressions, their humor, the way they thought—before the lockdown helped. I used Google Meet for our classroom. I extended the semester beyond Week 12 and held three more weeks of optional classes that functioned

as writing workshops and group therapy sessions. During those optional classes we gravitated toward peer editing in Google Doc, which was actually fun, if a little intense.

It turned into situations where you had the instructor and, say, five students feverishly combing through one student's lead scene or background section, with various editing colors flaring up on the document. There goes Matthew (he's in red) with a new turn of phrase; there goes Emily (she's in green) with a sharp line edit—it was a little wild! Students were collaborative and helpful and generally secure enough that they could receive opinions and suggestions about words, phrases, missing information and so on, yet still ultimately make sure their story was in their voice, not in multiple voices.

I'm not sure what it's going to be like when the Fall session begins in September. All of my colleagues have been taking Zoom workshops and learning about breakout rooms and waiting rooms and polls and such, and students will be doing the same in the next couple of weeks in advance of Week 1, but—I emphasize that this is my opinion—it won't be the same. First of all, I won't have that in-built familiarity with students. In fact, I won't know them at all. That's got to be a handicap right at the starting blocks. I mean, how are we to practice this kind of



ESSAY

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HANGING OUT

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journalism that we love?

The only idea I've come up with so far is to switch things around, so that draft one is a kind of research paper, with some telephone interviewing thrown in. Then, draft two showcases deeper reporting, probably a lot more

telephone reporting and longer interviews, plus additional research, to build reconstructed scenes (there won't be many, or any, opportunities to capture live footage). And then, if the social distancing eases up (a big if), the hanging-out time scene material might become available, albeit under certain conditions.

But Google Hangouts is not the same as hanging-out time . . .

Bill Reynolds is a professor at the Ryerson School of Journalism in Toronto and editor of Literary Journalism Studies. He and John S. Bak are currently co-editing The Routledge Companion to World Literary Journalism, scheduled to be published in 2022.



ESSAY

Australia's first COVID-19 case, reported on January 25, coincided with the end of our summer holidays. As I uploaded lecture schedules, assignments and marking rubrics for the coming semester, distressing images were increasingly flooding the

news channels of the impact of the novel coronavirus, first in Wuhan, then New York, then Italy.

At the beginning it seemed so far away, but within a month of semester starting Sydney was also in lockdown. Macquarie University, where I teach an introductory narrative journalism subject, closed in late February, at the beginning of the fourth of thirteen weeks of teaching. The mid-semester break was brought forward with the directive we should rewrite our courses and switch completely to online teaching. Like many other lecturers, I spent sleepless nights thinking through alternatives, trying to make it work. The question I kept coming back to was, how on earth do you teach a literary journalism class when no immersion is possible?

My short answer to that question is, you can't. Or, at least, I didn't find a completely satisfactory way. While my narrative journalism unit has a number of parts, the major assignment is broken into two sections. In the first half of the semester, the students prepare a research

MINDING THE GAP

Reflection closes the distance between the actual and the ideal

By Willa McDonald, Macquarie University (Australia)

portfolio which requires them to get out from behind their desks and immerse themselves in the community to report on an event or issue. The second half of the semester focuses on writing a narrative journalism article based on that immersive research.

COVID-19 made the original assignment plan impossible. At the time the university closed, my students were finalising their topics, beginning their background research and lining up the people they wanted to interview. But now we were all confined to our homes. Would they have to ditch all that preliminary work? If not, how were we going to adapt it?

As I was required to keep the learning outcomes and assignment categories as originally planned, the solution I came up with was to ask the students to work with their original topic but choose a person connected with it to profile—someone who would allow readers a glimpse into a bigger issue or theme than the individual being written about.

I urged students to move quickly, despite the early recess. With so much uncertainty, I hoped if they could contact people soon enough, they would get agreements for online interviews, or at least names, numbers and possibly private email addresses of potential interviewees, before businesses and organisations closed and people disappeared into lockdown.

To say the next few weeks were chaotic is an understatement. Many of the students, already confused, anxious and disrupted by the pandemic, were thrown by the change in direction.

Enrolments quickly dropped from around 130 to 100, where they hovered for the rest of the semester. Most students who stayed abandoned their original ideas but took far longer to pin down their profile subjects than I was comfortable with. Many thought they had to find a celebrity and took some convincing to understand that an ordinary person, standing for a deeper theme or issue, would suffice.

The interviews with profile subjects were all done online. Platforms like Zoom, Google Meet and Facetime provide some information – the sound of a voice, mannerisms, facial appearance – but very little context. It was a challenge for the students to find enough observational material to bring depth and nuance to their subject, let alone use literary techniques in the writing.

Happily, as the course progressed, profiles began to appear in the mainstream press that were also grappling with the constraints of lockdown. One in particular was useful for the students. The writer, Konrad Marshall, profiled a popular young female football player, acknowledging the fact the interviews were done virtually. Marshall noted the immersive research he would have done if he'd had the

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MINDING THE GAP

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opportunity¹. That was a breakthrough in helping students understand how they could gather material, write a research report and complete an engaging article, even during a pandemic.

When it came time to submit their final articles, the students were asked to attach a 300-word reflection. These showed most of them recognised the limits of their homebound research and could identify the elements of immersion that would have improved their work. By recognising the gaps, they were at least learning what was missing in their approach.

Switching to online teaching raised other challenges. While the students were already listening to online lectures, their weekly workshops were normally live. For two-hours, they would meet in person to discuss the lectures and the set readings, as well as work in small groups to edit writing tasks and/or sections of their major assignments.

I kept the workshops compulsory and in real time according to the original timetable, but asked students to contact me for alternative work if they couldn't attend, for example, because of illness, caring responsibilities or problems with data packages or bandwidth. The students were already expecting two online (self correcting!) multiple-choice tests of the content of the readings and lectures under the original course plan, assessments I had instituted a few years earlier simply to keep the students on track with their weekly participation.

The tests don't replace in-class discussion but provide students with the impetus to keep up with the lectures and readings. I added an extra multiple-choice test during the pandemic which meant they would do one every four weeks. This was to increase the push to keep them engaged, track more regularly how well they were keeping up with the lectures and readings, and act as an additional measure of class participation if students couldn't join the online workshops.

Although it prevented lively class discussions, Zoom provided a better environment in some ways for students to workshop each other's writing than the

face-to-face tutorials. Unless there was good reason, students were asked to keep their cameras on. Workshopping via screen sharing and randomly sorted breakout rooms meant they had to present their work to a range of their classmates, not just the people they sat next to each week in a live tutorial. The way Zoom "flattens" participation so each person is just a small face in a box on a screen, meant students who might normally dominate generally couldn't and the shy(er) (often more conscientious) students were able to contribute more.

I learned to give them short periods of private time together in their breakout rooms to let them bond, build trust and get some of the social interaction they were missing out on. This made it more enjoyable for them, but also improved the writing feedback they gave each other as the semester progressed.

By the end of semester, we were all exhausted. To my surprise, the mean grades were better than usual, with the multiple-choice test scores remarkably

high. I'd like to congratulate myself, but as one student commented, "I've been at home for weeks with nothing else to do but read and listen to lectures." I can depend on my students for a reality check; they're annoying, endearing, but always a reliable antidote to hubris.

NOTES

¹ Konrad Marshall, "Making her mark: how a photo brought Aussie Rules star Tayla Harris' A game to the trolls", *Good Weekend, Sydney Morning Herald*, April 25, 2020, <https://www.theage.com.au/sport/afl/making-her-mark-how-a-photo-brought-aussie-rules-star-tayla-harris-a-game-to-the-trolls-20200316-p54a11.html>

Dr. Willa McDonald is Senior Lecturer in Media at Macquarie University where she teaches and researches narrative journalism. She is writing a history of Australian colonial literary journalism for Palgrave and co-editing with Robert Alexander a volume on social justice and literary journalism.



THE NEW NORMAL

A student newspaper embraces the shift to all digital

By John Hanc, New York Institute of Technology (U.S.A.)

In mid-March, I waited in the blackness of a Zoom chat room for my Dean to arrive. One more time, I glanced through the notes I had scribbled for our meeting. As the faculty advisor for New York Tech's student newspaper, the *Campus Slate*, I was preparing to make an impassioned argument as to why, now that our campus was closed, it was imperative for a digital edition to be produced and distributed electronically to every student at our college.

Since my students had neither the access to such e-mails lists or the capacity for a mass distribution, we would need help from a source that is usually the antagonist of any independent student newspaper in the U.S.:

The administration.

First, I wanted to remind my Dean how important student journalism is—especially now. I had written down

Perhaps, I thought, it took
a global crisis to get them
motivated.

things like "important to keep sense of community" and "students need to feel connected" as talking points.

The Dean appeared, a bit stressed after having managed to pivot the entire College of Arts and Sciences at our college onto an online footing in about 24 hours. He didn't need a sales pitch. I was about 30 seconds into my oration, when he politely cut me off.

"It's a great idea," he said. "Let me know when the issue is ready. I'll take it to the President myself."

I was, as our British colleagues like to say, gobsmacked. And uncharacteristically at a loss for words.

"Uhhh...wow, thanks, Dan!" I said.

Now all we needed to do was put out an issue worthy of his faith in us. Typically, our print run was about a thousand copies—a depressingly large number of which seemed to sit unread in the distribution boxes situated on our Long Island, New York campus, ignored by a generation of digital natives. Now the *Slate*, along with the student publication of Tech's Manhattan campus was going to be emailed to about ten thousand students, faculty, staff.

Were my students up to it?

At our first Zoom class, as they looked out at me from their Hollywood Squares-style boxes, I encouraged them to see this as a great and rare opportunity—when for once, the student paper, with its steadily dwindling readership, was now going to spring back into the center of campus life.

I also encouraged them to go longer and deeper in their stories. "These aren't text messages," I reminded them.

"Does everything have to be about this virus?" asked my editor. "People are going to get sick of hearing about this."

In my opinion, he was right. Thus, the line-up of our first all-digital issue was eclectic, and included a look at Harvey Weinstein's sentencing and the implication of the Me-Too Movement for young women entering the workforce; a profile on the controversial Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi; and a rundown on student investment apps.

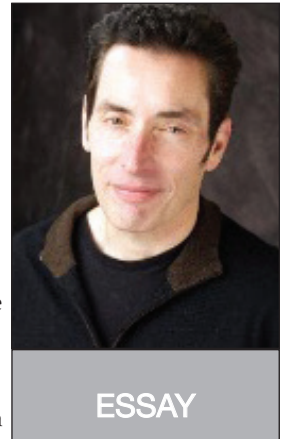
But we also had a request by one of our staff writers—a quiet basketball player, who I thought was taking the class because it was Pass-Fail and met only once a week—if we would consider publishing

a poem he had written in light of the pandemic. A poem? I thought. This was supposed to be a journalism class. But, heck...maybe poetry counts as journalism in the New Normal? "It's up to the editor," I said. "But I think it's a great idea."

The cover story for the issue, smartly-written by one of our history-minded undergraduates, took a look at the influenza epidemic of 1918-19 and what lessons we could learn from that. On balance, the pieces—even the poem—struck me as better than anything I'd seen previously from this group. Literary journalism? Maybe not. But still, quality student journalism. Perhaps, I thought, it took a global crisis to get them motivated.

Our student designer created the PDF, we sent it off to our Dean and in early April the first digital-only issue in the 56-year-history of the *Campus Slate* was sent out under the signature of our president, Hank Foley. In his covering email, as opposed to disavowing the contents or claiming to be misquoted (the typical complaints of college presidents about student newspapers), Hank wrote an email praising the students for producing such a fine issue under such difficult circumstances.

A month later, the student staff produced our annual Commencement issue. Usually distributed in print form at our annual graduation ceremony, this one, too, was emailed to the NY Tech community—this time by the Office of



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THE NEW NORMAL

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Special Events, as a “keepsake” issue for the virtual commencement. In addition to profiles of graduating seniors, one of our writers contributed a COVID-related story looking at how 3-D printing had been employed at a local medical center to produce much needed nasal swabs for testing. A nifty and timely piece of journalism, if I did say so myself.

The writer of that story, then a freshman, is now our editor. She and our other returning writers have been working hard on a Back to School issue requested by our Dean of Student Affairs. This, too, is scheduled to be distributed via an email from the president. Clearly, we are in a new era. But one that in all likelihood cannot endure indefinitely; and is fraught with some ethical nail biting.

There are many faculty advisors around the U.S. who would have questioned, if not downright disagreed, with our decision to work with the administration like this. It violates the

independence of a free press, some might say; breaks the so-called “church and state” wall. Others would not be happy to hear of such a chummy relationship with those in power.

I understand and am sensitive to any hint that we might be used as a “house organ”—a p.r. mouthpiece for the college—but as a pragmatist, I say: what was the alternative? No paper? An issue distributed through the Slate’s anemic social media reach? By contrast, these two digital editions of the paper probably have had greater readership than any since it began publication in 1966, the year after our Long Island campus opened.

Besides, as a writer, I know what writers crave as much as anything: To be read. To have an impact. Especially when you’re 21 and most of what you say in your day to day life doesn’t seem to matter. These student writers made an impression. Heck, we even got the first letter to the editor by a non-complaining reader in about a decade. Interestingly, it was a local Catholic priest of Indian descent, who had been sent a copy by one of his congregants, whose granddaughter

happened to be on our staff. He praised the Slate for what he felt was a brave look at the controversial Modi.

I fully recognize that there will come a time when our editors may choose to write something critical about leaders closer to us than New Delhi—namely, our administration. And the administration might, in such a case, respond by refusing to disseminate the issue under the signature of the president.

For now, I’m proud of the way my students have responded. I’m happy that the people running my college, in the midst of an unprecedented crisis, recognized the value of an independent student publication. No one has attempted to compromise that—at least not yet. And so, for the time being, at least from the perspective of this journalism educator, I’m enjoying the New Normal.

IALJS member John Hanc is a professor in the Communication Arts department of New York Institute of Technology. He is also a long-time, regular contributor to the New York Times and Newsday, and author/co-author of 18 general nonfiction books.

NOT BAD, CONSIDERING

A master’s student reflects on writing features in a pandemic

By Alex Cyr, Ryerson University (Canada)

One of the first tips we were given in longform journalism class was to meet with our sources in person as much as possible, instead of relying on our phones and screens to communicate. The separation blurs the story.

The last two weeks of March were indeed blurry. My classmates and I were still drafting our 3,000-word features, and had several interviews left to conduct—some initial, others follow-up—when the world shut down. My story about a man who moved to Thailand after burning out from North American work culture suddenly felt trivial. Still, I contacted sources. Some never responded, others were relieved to talk to someone, but seemed preoccupied.

Our weekly, six-hour class moved

to a glitchy Google Hangout, where the afternoon coffee was at times replaced with wine. For a while, I felt defeated—I was cornered into the virtual, sub-optimal kind of journalism our professor had warned us against.

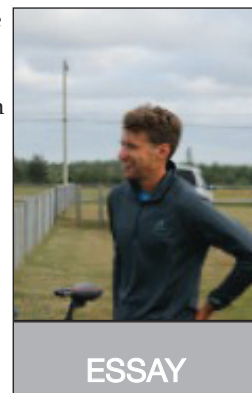
During our virtual gatherings, however, our class became cooperative. We transferred all our drafts to a Google Doc, which allowed for frequent and efficient feedback. We helped each other find ideas for new sources, when some of them flaked on us. Our professor invited high-profile writers as guest lecturers to add variety to our meetings. Those writers shared their ideas on how to circumvent our new limitations, they admitted to being vulnerable to them just like us, and they invited us to pitch to their

publications. Some of them drank wine with us too.

Even with these initiatives, it was difficult at times to stay motivated for virtual class. The shared experience made it easier. I was surrounded by talented writers determined

to produce the best work despite the situation. Without our weekly hangout, it would have been easy to give up.

Now half a year into the pandemic, we’ve overcome most of our initial challenges. Our professors are now seasoned Hangouts users. Sources have fewer qualms with showing us their messy backdrops and talking to us. We’ve become



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NOT BAD, CONSIDERING

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comfortable editing a Google doc with nine of our classmates, wielding the copy and paste functions in a dizzying synergy that always ends up making sense.

But still, losing our right to roam our surroundings for several months

leaves lasting scars. Students like me enter an already precarious job market with recent clippings that are a degree removed from reality – clippings that I think are “not bad, considering.”

Before the pandemic, our professors encouraged us to always go out in the world to find stories. There is nothing like a real-world example of what

the opposite looks like to drive that point. Yet, writing a feature from home is a skill that we might need for the foreseeable future. I’m happy I got to sharpen it.

Alex Cyr is in his final year of the Master’s in Journalism at Ryerson University. He has written with The Globe and Mail, The Ryersonian, Times and Transcript and more.

“WHAT IS THE NATURE OF HUMAN NATURE?”

Literary journalism helps us to explore this question. So does the impact of COVID-19.

By Mitzi Lewis, Midwestern State University (U.S.A.)

I remember when I first heard “literary journalism” and “nature of human nature” in the same breath: it was from David Abrahamson at the IALJS 2015 conference host panel, “What is Literary Journalism? A 10th Anniversary Discussion.” Our host that year, Tom Connery, moderated a discussion with David Abrahamson, John Hartsock, Sue Joseph, Isabelle Meuret, and Nancy Roberts. I have thought a lot about that panel and that question since 2015, and my observations of society’s reaction to COVID-19—and to our students’ reactions, specifically—have provided plenty of grist for the mill.

Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have brought home to me that part of the nature of human nature is that we are social creatures, and when our ways of connecting with each other are interrupted, we are affected. I have

seen this play out in personal life, work life, society, and, not the least of all, the classroom.

In the spring we were given about a week’s notice to move from face-to-face interactions and learning to remote interactions and learning. Based on the fact that most of the students at my institution belong to “Gen Z,” the “always on” generation who have grown up as digital natives, one might think they would adapt to this new way of learning without too much trouble. However, that has not been my observation or the observation of my colleagues. To be fair, we pivoted to remote delivery of classes without prior notice, so the result was different than it would have been with advance preparation. Still, while students were generally understanding and worked with the new delivery mode as best they could, some struggled and expressed frustrations

such as those seen in these tweets: “Okay, fine the University of Phoenix is a real school. There, I said it. Now give me back my on campus classes, this online thing is WACK” and “I would rather go to class in a hazmat suit than take online classes in Fall.”

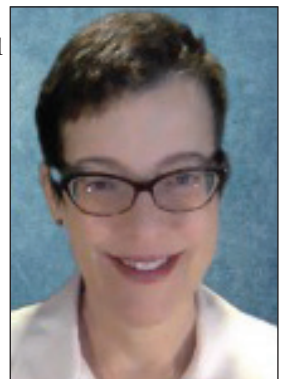
Students need connection. We all do. This need is in our nature. My

top priority in preparing for fall classes became figuring out how to foster connection and engagement in a remote learning environment. Here is some of what I learned.

First, my observations of students’ reactions in the spring were not an anomaly. A group of researchers who surveyed 15,677 students across 21 U.S. college and universities found that

- “Students lacked a sense of belonging and connection to others at their institution. While they felt somewhat connected to their instructors, few reported feeling very connected to other students” (p. 4); and
- Approximately half as many students who are *not planning to re-enroll* felt connected to other students compared to those who did plan to re-enroll. Additionally, these students were more likely to be concerned about their *mental health*” (p. 19) (emphasis mine).

To build a sense of belonging and connection, I decided to focus on (a) setting the stage with class environment and (b)



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HUMAN NATURE

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creating opportunities for interaction. I picked up valuable approaches from a range of sources, including colleagues at my institution, various educators on Twitter and Facebook, a webpage of community building activities put together by Equity Unbound and OneHE, a math professor whose experience also includes street-busker, variety show performer, and comedy troupe director, and a group of co-panelists for this year's AEJMC conference (Kim Fox, Steve Fox, Nicole Kraft, and Brian Steffen). Here are some of the strategies I am using.

- Hold classes synchronously.
- Communicate early and often.
- Reach out to students at the first sign of possible struggle, such as missing class or missing an assignment; track these events to identify at-risk students earlier (for example a student who misses a class without any communication and who also misses an assignment).
- Create a playlist with music submitted by students and play that music when waiting for class to start.
- Get students interacting at the beginning of each class with icebreakers and check-ins; instead of calling on students, have students "pass the mic" to each other.

- Share information in manageable "chunks" then put students into groups of 3 or 4 to apply that information to a specific task with a specific deliverable.
- Give students a short break if the class meeting is longer than an hour; encourage them to get up and move, and play the playlist of their music during the break.
- Encourage students to connect outside of class.
- Have a backup plan for technology glitches.
- Solicit feedback at different times throughout the course to see what is working well for students and where they are confused or frustrated; make adjustments as needed.

We are still early in the semester, but initial feedback is promising. Here are a few student comments from an anonymous survey given at the end of the first two weeks of class.

- "You make the class feel stable, calm, and collected."
- "The group activities and chatbox has been working great because we are able to express ourselves. I know what our other classmates are thinking and learn their opinions."
- "Love your teaching style. It makes it really easy for me to learn better and interact more with our classmates

when still doing online."

- "I think the breakout rooms are a great! It gives us a chance to get to know our classmates and also a space to voice and collect our thoughts before sharing with everyone!"

I find that teaching in this new environment takes even more time and energy than previous semesters have required. So far, I am encouraged by student participation and connection with me and, especially, with each other. For example, some students in one of my classes have surprised me by staying in our Zoom room after class sessions are over to hang out with each other (I mute my mic, turn my video off, and let the students know I'm going to go do work away from the screen for a little while) and several of my classes have used the GroupMe app to set up a text messaging space for those who wish to join.

As we continue our semester together, I will keep exploring the question, "what is the nature of human nature?" and I will be guided by what I learn from my students. We are social. We need to connect. We are in this together.

Mitzi Lewis is an Associate Professor of Mass Communication in the Lamar D. Fain College of Fine Arts at Midwestern State University. Her research interests include literary journalism, pedagogy, and curriculum.

BRAVING SYNCHRONICITY

Even online, it's possible to build human connection

By David Swick, University of King's College (Canada)

Teaching is always more fun than preparing a course, but never before had prep been beastly.

Through the surreal and miserable spring I stumbled, adjusting to the shock of a pandemic (!), mourning the loss of my office, and reading contradictory advice about teaching online. Instead of enjoying travel and seeing the IALJS in Copenhagen, I was producing lectures and slideshows for a course planned to be both online and asynchronous.

Losing the classroom was one thing; not being in real time was a step too far. Constructing that kind of course felt like building a house that I hated. A house of fakery, of form over substance. A house where you would sit on, not in, the chairs. A week before the June 3 course launch I was frustrated and unhappy. My wife sat me down. "Asynchronous," she said, "in your case, is nonsense. You are good in front of a class, you bring energy, and you care. Teach in as human a way as you can." Robin was right. Coming to academia

after 25 years in newspapers and magazines, I always teach young journalists by establishing an editor-to-writer relationship. Out went "asynchronous." (The very word sounds pinched and ill.) Back came classes in real time. (All of the students being in North America, time



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BRAVING SYNCHRONICITY

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zones were not a concern.)

The course—a writing class for seven MJs — turned out to be a hit. All of the students were engaged and learned a great deal. Three improved enormously, and one caught fire. For the first time in her life, she knew the thrill of writing brilliantly.

These students' courage and effort were key to their success. Also helpful was real-time mentoring. Twice a week we had 90-minute live classes, and every student had an hour-long Zoom call with the prof every week.

Real-time classes brought a sense of community. One-on-one Zoom calls helped build trust and common purpose. Breakthroughs also came on phone calls (students could call whenever they wished). On the phone the two shyest students — released from the charm assault of their peers in a regular classroom, and the teacher looking at them online — were braver and more centered. Note to self: teaching intimate journalism can go better when no one is looking.

Preparing the course was an ugly rush, but its timing turned out to be a blessing. I am grateful to have taught my first online course to a small class in June, rather than prepare over several months to first try online with a huge class in September.

Online would not be my first choice: the classroom rules. And my courses in the autumn and winter will be larger, so one-on-ones — while crucial — will be shorter and less frequent. Still, overall this first course of teaching online was more satisfying, and more successful, than expected.

Yes, it is a new format. Ultimately, though, I learned that teaching online is not about technology. It is about using technology to build human-to-human connection. And teachers who love literary journalism will appreciate that.

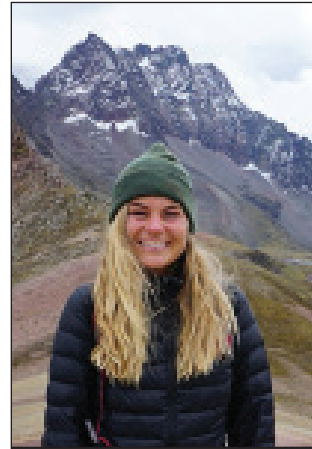
David Swick teaches BJH and MJ writing courses at the University of King's College in Halifax, Canada. He feels fortunate that his 2020 will be memorable for (among other things) delightful hours reading in a hammock.

WRITE LIKE NO ONE IS LOOKING

Being out of the classroom can help students take risks

By Ellen Riopelle, University of King's College (Canada)

My first interview of the Covid era was not going well. The funeral home owner and I sat in his small office, the wooden desk between us topped with a Kleenex box. My prepared questions weren't working. So I set them aside and told him a story about the funeral of a family friend. In turn, he told me about a drive-by funeral for a 14-year-old boy.



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As people drove past the grieving family, they held signs saying "we love you" out their car windows.

Oddly, this was when we both started to relax.

I've always found writing to be a delicate balance.

The creative and messy part can feel like throwing yourself headfirst down a flight of stairs. The detailed, intricate process of editing and re-editing is patching up all the scrapes from the fall. Creativity requires bravery; editing needs dedication.

In my second year of undergrad a professor unexpectedly asked the class to read our writing out loud. As I looked around at all the strangers in the room, my heart rate soared. If I'd known we were to share our writing I would have been more reserved. It reminded me of the time my parents read my journal without permission — it felt like a betrayal of privacy.

To my surprise, my first online course allowed me to open up. Writing from home — in isolation — I could relax my

shoulders and write from the heart.

That's not to say it was an easy adjustment. In the beginning, virtual learning was awkward and glitchy. It was a lot like the act of writing: stilted and forced at first but, with some patience and trust, freeing.

Phone calls and video links created just enough space between my classmates, professor and me that I felt able to write with fewer restrictions. For the first time in years, I wasn't concerned with what my classmates were doing — and how they were doing it. The professor became less of an authority figure and more of an editor and friend — the kind that gives you honest, informed (and sometimes harsh) advice.

Outside of the classroom, away from my peers and professor, I could focus on the creative and messy work without fear of interruption or judgement. It felt like finger painting with washable instead of permanent paint.

In the midst of mourning the intimacy lost over the past few months — hugging friends and handshakes — I rediscovered an intimacy I didn't know I had lost: honest and vulnerable writing.

Ellen Riopelle is a master's of journalism student at the University of King's College in Halifax, Canada.

To my surprise, my first online course allowed me to open up. Writing from home—in isolation—I could relax my shoulders and write from the heart.

REMOTE IMMERSION

The power of not going there

By Lisa A. Phillips, SUNY New Paltz (U.S.A.)

Go there. At least once a semester, I write these words on the white board in my journalism classes. The phrase is meant to get my students away from their screens and out into the world. In courses on longform, literary journalism and feature writing, I teach techniques of immersion as a way to gain the poignant insight and detail that make news stories more vivid and meaningful.

As I contend with what it means to immerse and to teach immersion in a pandemic, I realize that my many years of cheerleading “going there” perhaps led me to underplay an aspect of my own reporting process that might be particularly valuable now: the power of interviews that are not conducted in person. The power, in short, of *not* going there.

My main beat, as I like to say, is “love and heartbreak.” I write about mental health and romantic relationships, interweaving my subjects’ stories with research and expert insight in a classic feature reporting blend of narrative and context. My second book, *Unrequited*, is about women’s experiences of romantic obsession. I conducted few of the interviews for that book in person. At first this just seemed like a practical matter, as many of my subjects lived far away. Yet

even when I offered to meet sources face to face, the personal, taboo nature of the subject matter meant they often preferred the phone.

The conversations were focused and intimate, lasting for hours. I often thought of the wisdom of Terry Gross, the longtime host of the popular American radio show *Fresh Air*, who extols the benefits of remote interviews. It’s like a Catholic confessional, she told Longform podcast in 2017. “You don’t see the person you’re confessing to, and they don’t see you. I think that allows a certain comfort that you’re saying something that you’re maybe not comfortable saying.”¹

I do want a lot more immersion and face to face interviewing for the new book I’m working on, about how the commitment-skittish and sexually reluctant youth (It’s true! As a demographic, they’re having less sex than their parents did at their age.) of Generation Z experience first love.

I’m on sabbatical for the 2020-21 academic year, time I had intended to use to travel in the U.S. and internationally, speaking with young people and using immersion techniques to portray their lives and loves. I’m crestfallen to have my wings clipped. But, like reporters and writers everywhere, I’m finding ways to get the

job done.

Like many of us, I find Zoom work meetings frustrating and draining. Online social events send me into existential despair. But I think Zoom is awesome for talking to people about love. It’s not telephone / confessional

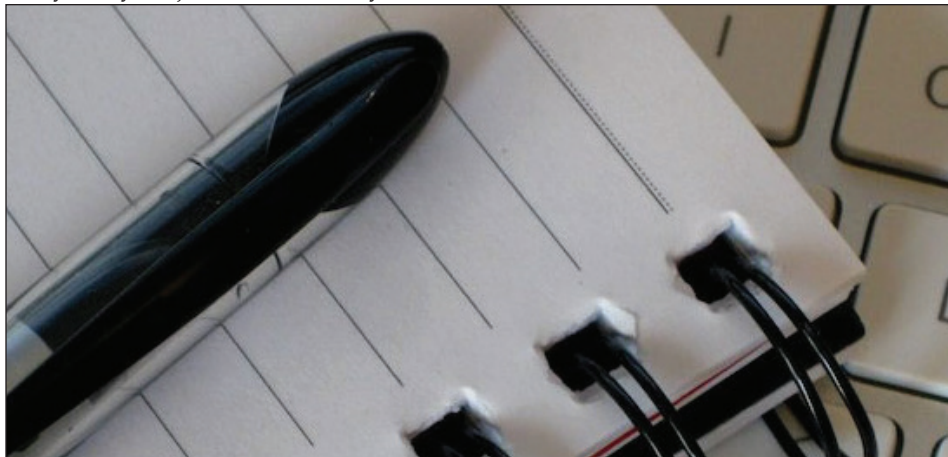
booth invisible, but the depth of the exchange is just as good or better. I think that may have something to do with the nature of the online world young people have known from the time they were babies, smiling and cooing at their out-of-state grandparents over Facetime.

The loneliness of the pandemic, I suspect, is making my interview subjects, their emerging adulthood on hold, reflective and welcoming of new connections, even to a very curious journalist their mother’s age, asking them lots of personal questions about their love lives.

Zoom offers new possibilities for the oxymoronic pursuit of “remote immersion.” I can pick up on facial expressions and body language, steering the conversation accordingly. I asked a young couple, together since middle school, to take me on a tour of their new apartment.

I’ve probed my sources about unusual hair dye colors, artwork, bicycle commuting, tattoos, and, yes, book titles, taking cues from the view from my laptop screen. One young woman greeted me holding a huge cardboard box, which contained love notes and cartoon sketches from her expressive high school boyfriend. She held them up to her laptop camera, reminiscing about their three-year relationship.

All this is no substitute for IRL presence. I don’t think Zooming will be



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REMOTE IMMERSION

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enough for the book I hope to write. But I can get a lot done while I'm waiting for the world to open up. Even though I'm not teaching this year, what I'm doing may have some important takeaways for the classroom. What Zoom offers is a kind of starter kit for immersion, a gentle limit on the often bewildering amount of sensory and factual information young reporters have to absorb when they're witnessing "the moving now." Zoom offers an introduction to noticing, kind of like the kids' nature camp lesson of putting a circle of yarn on the ground outside and observing what happens inside. You had no idea so much action could go on in such a small space of forest or field.

There are practical advantages to Zoom interviews, too. Even if the pandemic hadn't reared its ugly crowned head, I might be using Zoom anyway at

this stage of my book. I'm spreading my net wide, interviewing as many people as possible in the search for compelling central characters and situations for each chapter. Zoom makes the process time efficient and inexpensive; I can get a strong sense of my sources' stories and gauge whether to take the eventual gamble on immersing myself in their lives. Zoom also allows me to incubate the long term journalist-subject relationships necessary for immersive reporting. At the end of the conversation, I often tell my sources that I plan to stay in touch, and I hope to get to meet them. I know that in the meanwhile, their lives will move forward and their perspective on the joys and pain of early relationships will evolve. As they gain distance from the experience, I'll gain more insight on how first love changes lives over the long term.

Finally, I'll say that until the world opens up, "remote immersion" may not be an oxymoron after all. The online

world is, for many across the globe, the primary setting of the pandemic. It's where we work, teach, learn, navigate conflict, and nurture social attachments. It's where we're living much of our lives. In other words, it's exactly where journalists need to be spending a lot of their time.

NOTES

¹ Terry Gross, interview with Max Linsky. Longform, podcast audio, January 2, 2017. <https://longform.org/posts/longform-podcast-226-terry-gross>.

Lisa A. Phillips is an associate professor and chair of the Department of Digital Media and Journalism at the State University of New York at New Paltz. She is the author of Unrequited: Women and Romantic Obsession (HarperCollins) and Public Radio: Behind the Voices (Perseus). Her bylines include The New York Times, The Washington Post, Psychology Today, and Longreads.

DISCOVERING VALUE IN THE FAMILIAR

The quiet and ordinary are also worth discovering

By Melissa Nurczynski, Kutztown University (U.S.A.)

Completing the assignments for my travel writing class, a class in which one of the assignments has always been a "literary travelogue" has always been a challenge due to the constraints of budget, time and transportation but the pandemic has made what was once challenging outright dangerous. Conversely and rather happily, it has, however, caused my students to value the readings far more.

Upon discovering they can escape to far-flung and exotic locales through the words of Pico Iyer or Susan Orlean or Paul Theroux, I've dealt with the peculiar delight of having some students request more reading and more reading discussions be added to the syllabus.

As pleasant as that experience has been, my class remains a praxis one

and the students must produce a written travelogue. As much as I insist to them that travel doesn't have to be long distance or require visiting crowded outdoor concerts or markets, the students collectively resist the assignment because to them traveling involves motion, action and most often crowds. One of the literary pieces that inspires this notion in them is Pico Iyer's "Maximum India," where the author travels to the ancient city of Varanasi to witness the death rituals. Nothing in their own neighborhood parks could be nearly so interesting or involve so many people and so much noise.

Thankfully, Pico Iyer himself presented me with an opportunity to show them that staying close to home and appreciating quiet can make travel experiences, when one has them, more

vivid. The same writer who seems perpetually in motion gave a TED Talk in 2015 on The Art of Stillness. In it, he talks about the importance of quiet, ordinary places in his suburban neighborhood and learning to spend time in them and even write

about them. The video, which is short and helpful to break up a Zoom session, became the inspiration for their travelogue. Before going somewhere different, I instructed them to spend time in the stillness of a familiar place and write.

Melissa Nurczynski teaches narrative nonfiction, magazine writing, travel writing and literary journalism at Kutztown University of Pennsylvania.



MAKING JOURNALISM PERSONAL

Lessons from guiding students through self-reporting

By Kate McQueen, University of California Santa Cruz (U.S.A.)

A big part of what makes journalism stand out among forms of nonfiction is the expectation, if not the imperative, to tell other people's stories. That's why—in normal times—when I invite students in my "Writing for Public Audiences" course to compose an explanatory feature in lieu of an academic research paper, I ask them to avoid constructing stories around their own experiences. Writing "self"-centered narratives can seem like an easy way out of the work of reporting—the sometimes tedious observation and interviewing needed to create meaningful characters and scenes on a page.

Spring quarter 2020 changed all of that. Our class cohort was scattered across the globe and the shelter-in-place order showed no signs of lifting. For logistical and for safety reasons, self-reporting was just about all they could do. At the same time, my students wanted to explore topics that touched their lives directly, to a degree I had not seen before. COVID-19 was, as could be expected, a popular topic.

I decided to lean into what Walt Harrington calls "personal journalism," the practice of writing about oneself but with "the same standard of literary documentary accuracy" one would use in any other reporting situation.¹ Early in the quarter I assigned Harrington's essay "When Writing About Yourself is Still Journalism," from his collection called *Artful Journalism: Essays in the Craft and Magic of True Storytelling* (2015).

The piece introduces students to the concept and stakes of personal journalism, and offers a quick, clear example of what it looks like to report on yourself. Harrington describes an article written by a former colleague, *Washington Post* reporter Pete Earley called "Missing Alice," about his sister's accidental death years earlier.

"For his story," Harrington writes, "Pete returned to his Colorado hometown and walked the streets, sat in

the pews of his old church, climbed down into the ditch where his sister's body had been thrown in the accident, interviewed the police and medical officials who had handled the case, his own parents, and, finally, the woman who had driven the car that killed his sister."

After analyzing sample articles to get a sense of the first-person at work in explanatory stories, my students identified personal anecdotes that could serve as a narrative skeleton for their own pieces. I then asked them to submit a reporting plan. In the footsteps of Pete Earley, they arranged and conducted interviews with people with whom they shared their experiences: family members, friends, neighbors, former professors. They revisited physical spaces, even if just in photographs. And digital spaces, too, combing texts and posts for potential direct quotes. Finally, as part of their revision process, they attempted to fact-check their memories.

Here are a few examples of the work students produced with this guided self-reporting process:

- An explanatory story about grief and the grieving process during the pandemic, woven around a student's experience of losing a relative in Colombia and only being able to participate in funeral rituals via Zoom.
- An explanatory story about the impact of COVID-19 on communities of color, narrated through the experiences of the student's extended family in Los Angeles.
- An explanatory story about sustainable farming practices in times of global warming, told through the lens of a student's family farm in California's Central Valley.
- An explanatory story on the impact of social media on the mental health of teenage girls, by way of the student's own engagement with Facebook.

In the face of so much disruption—in their personal lives and in their learning style—I expected many

students to have a hard time connecting to their research and to submit incomplete work. Instead the opposite happened. Giving students the permission, the tools, and a structure for writing about themselves helped sustain their engagement through a truly tough quarter.

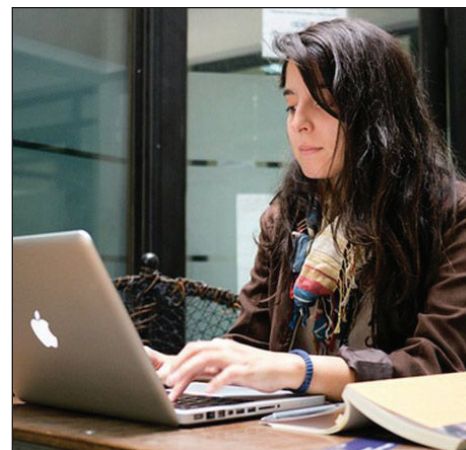
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¹ Walt Harrington, "When Writing About Yourself is Still Journalism," *Artful Journalism: Essays in the Craft and Magic of True Storytelling* (The Sager Group, 2015) 124, 125.

Kate McQueen is lecturer at University of California Santa Cruz. Her research and teaching interests include the history and practice of literary journalism, and narratives of crime and justice.



ESSAY



SHIFTING FROM THE WHOLE TO THE PARTS

Breaking down the writing so we don't break down

By Jacqueline Marino, Kent State University (U.S.A.)



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In my Feature Writing class, my students usually think of “the story” as a completed feature that will appear under their bylines, not a series of thoughtfully written paragraphs and sentences filled with carefully chosen words.

But this semester will be different.

Teaching during a time of mandated social distancing requires accepting a difficult reality, one literary journalists have not faced since the Spanish flu, if they even knew to face it then. Normal face-to-face (or mask-to-mask) interviewing isn't safe. Your school may not even allow students to do it. Forget about in-person immersion. Forget about breathing the same air as your characters. Embrace Zoom, Skype, FaceTime, email, social media and the phone. These tools are no longer optional or worst-case-scenario. They are how we will get the job done.

I am anticipating technology problems and depression. I went through both myself while teaching a more advanced writing class in the spring. To get through both, I still thought and talked about “the story” as a completed feature. And those students did produce full stories, just not the stories they intended to write. This semester, I will not be talking about “the story” as if it were one thing but a series of things instead. Because students will not have as many options for reporting (and no opportunity for immersion), I will assign fewer full stories. We will focus instead on the craft of writing, going deep into paragraphs,

sentences, words, and punctuation. We will examine structure under a high-powered microscope and explore how all these things work together to produce style.

The students will read *A Writer's Coach* by Jack Hart. This text instructs new journalists to broaden their thinking about the pieces and parts that go into their craft. I always start with the chapter on idea development. The chapters on process and structure are also excellent. I expect we will spend more time than usual on the chapters focused on style and mechanics. During a normal semester, I focus on helping the students complete full drafts of stories they then publish in student media and sometimes professional media outlets. Rarely do I have time to talk about hyphens. But this semester, we

Rarely do I have time to talk about hyphens. But this semester, we will slow down.

will slow down. Instead of three stories, they'll write only two. I will raise the bar on the quality of their sentences, the force of their phrasing and the eradication of impediments to their style.

I will also pull from *Reading Like a Writer*, by Francine Prose. This is a book about creative writing broken into chapters that could be entire MFA workshop seminars: Words, Sentences, Paragraphs, Detail, and Gesture, among others. Acknowledging that the aspiring writer may be tempted to read quickly in order to read as many great works in the canon as she can, Prose implores her instead to slow down. “All the elements of good writing depend on the writer's skill in choosing one word instead of another,” she writes. “And what grabs and keeps our interest

has everything to do with those choices.” (16)

When we talk about Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, we will look at the carefully constructed description of Perry's tattoos:

While he had fewer tattoos than his companion, they were more elaborate—not the self-inflicted work of an amateur but epics of art contrived by Honolulu and Yokohama masters. COOKIE, the name of a nurse who had been friendly to him when he was hospitalized, was tattooed on his right biceps. Blue-furred, orange-eyed, red-fanged, a tiger snarled upon his left biceps; a spitting snake, coiled around a dagger, slithered down his arm; and elsewhere skulls gleamed, a tombstone loomed, a chrysanthemum flourished. (32)

With the choice of verbs to describe the tattoos—“snarled,” “spitting,” “coiled,” “slithered”—each seems alive and ominous. They help Capote establish the character of his dangerous protagonist.

Craft gets more involved when we move into sentences and paragraphs. Each one must be written in a way that propels the reader forward. In her Pulitzer Prize-winning essay for The New York Times's “The 1619 Project,” Nikole Hannah-Jones writes this powerful paragraph describing her embarrassment about her father's insistence of flying the American flag outside her childhood home:

Like most young people, I thought I understood so much, when in fact I understood so little. My father knew exactly what he was doing when he raised that flag. He knew that our people's contributions to building the richest and most powerful nation in the world were indelible, that the United States simply would not exist without us.

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SHIFTING FROM THE WHOLE

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That paragraph is deceptive in its simplicity. The use of “I” often seems lazy to readers. Of course, we know what we think—but it isn’t often so. This is a personal revelation about the tension she feels, one that promises an education for us, too. When the students complain, as they inevitably will, about not being able to go to events, interview subjects in person or do real immersion, I will tell

them to look to cinema for inspiration. In all but the most well-funded productions, limitations are often used like tools to force creativity.

That was the case for writer-director James Ford Murphy, who made “Lava,” a short film released in 2015. Was it difficult to write a love story about two volcanos that spans millions of years? Of course. The challenge made it better. “You accept the limitations of what [the characters] are and work within those and cool things come out of this,” he told

Lights Film School.

The limitations imposed by COVID-19 will not be around forever. Let’s use them to improve our writing while we still can.

Jacqueline Marino, a professor of journalism at Kent State University, studies the digital evolution of storytelling. Her work has been published in Journalism: Theory, Practice, and Criticism and Literary Journalism Studies, as well as in Cleveland Magazine, River Teeth, and The Washington Post.

NOT ANOTHER COVID STORY

Literary journalism offers reprieve from the torrent of coronavirus news

By Jeff Neely, The University of Tampa (U.S.A.)

It was only April, and we were already weary. All of us. Trapped in our homes, tied to our computers, and constantly bombarded by news of the coronavirus.

As a journalism professor, I knew, of course, that we had to talk about how the press was covering COVID-19. Actually, we had been for some time—tracking the news of the novel virus as it broke out in China, traveled to Europe, and quickly made its way to the shores of the U.S.

And now my students, told not to return to campus after spring break, were home with their families, scattered across the globe, and trying to complete their spring semester remotely.



In my Introduction to Journalism class, I organized a virtual press conference with some of the top administrators at our university, who discussed how the school

was handling everything from media messaging to housing concerns to grading policies. It was a great first-hand opportunity for these young reporters to get an inside look at how the news is done. But man were we weary. COVID coverage is heavy, and we had gotten a lot of it.

Somewhere in the midst of this storm of coronavirus headlines, breaking relentlessly like the waves of a tempest on our news consciousness, I assigned the students to read a few feature stories and a couple of literary journalism pieces. We needed a respite.

I pulled out two classics: “Frank Sinatra has a Cold” and “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved.” It was only a taste of what the genre had to offer, but it was something different. It was a temporary escape, and it was a reminder that even during a pandemic there is more to life than masks and social distancing.

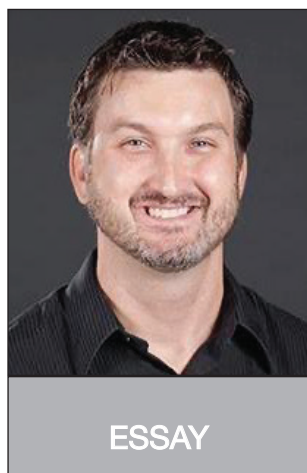
To follow up on the readings, I organized small-group discussions with the students over Zoom. It had worked. Many of the students told me how much they appreciated being able to read something that wasn’t about the coronavirus. There was an energy in their comments about the readings that had not been there before.

Yes, we talked about narrative technique and voice and all the things we like to unpack when we cover literary

journalism in our classes. But it was also pure pleasure.

Sure, it was clear that some of the students didn’t do the readings. Even in quarantine, many of us still resist the effort required to mine the riches of any longform text. But for those who did read, it was clear that this had been a gift. Many of the students made comments like, “It was nice just to read a good story and not think about the coronavirus for a little while.”

In my research over the years, largely consisting of interviews with other post-secondary instructors, I have often found teachers value the inspiration literary journalism provides to students. Too often, some instructors have told me, we try to teach students how to do journalism and how to write, but too rarely



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NOT ANOTHER COVID STORY

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do we give them opportunities to simply read good stories.

I could search for a million metaphors, but one thing I've learned in teaching journalism during a pandemic is that we all need some mental rest. Particularly in teaching journalism, we are often pummeled by the lightning-fast jabs of negative news. We are inundated in a flood of 600-word stories that give us the latest facts but not always an opportunity for reflection.

Sometimes, we need the simple

joy that comes from reading a good story, even if it's about a challenging subject. Can I take my eyes off the pandemic long enough to be reminded by about the struggles of a poor, urban "Random Family"? Can I take time to read about wrestling with faith, culture and crime in "Salvation on Sand Mountain"? Heck, could I just have a moment to "Consider the Lobster"? We need to learn about other things in the world around us so that when this whole thing is over we remember who we are, at our core.

Some of my students care about the inverted pyramid, the 5 W's and the role of journalism in a democratic society.

But particularly right now, a lot of them are simply trying to make it through another bizarre, stressful semester. Maybe sitting in with The Rat Pack at the Sands, listening to jokes from Don Rickles will help get them through. Or maybe catching a glimpse of Thompson and Steadman — on deadline with no story, as drunk and as depraved as the Derby fans they've caricatured — gives students some hope that things could always be worse.

Jeff Neely is an associate professor at The University of Tampa. His research focuses, in part, on literary journalism and its pedagogical value for contributing to a liberal education.

THE HAZY VIEW FROM MOUNT EMERITUS

Pandemic-disrupted education is a story for future longform writers

By David Abrahamson, Northwestern University (U.S.A.)

After 25 years as a member of Northwestern University faculty, last fall I wrote to my dean, telling him I would be retiring on January 1, 2020. I confess I made the decision pretty much on impulse. I had not really been contemplating it. Instead, out of the blue, I suddenly admitted to myself that I had had a good run, and that I had



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been allowed to accomplish so much more than I'd ever imagined in those 25 years. In addition, I have to confess that medical issues—hobbling but not threatening—had become ever more pressing.

Further, I had come across a saying that

seemed to have a special relevance: "When considering leaving, better a few years too early than a few months too late." It seemed to make an awful lot of sense.

Talk about lucky timing! As we all know, two months into 2020, the roof caved in. Suddenly the campus was closed, everyone was ordered to shelter in

place and remote teaching was the order of the day. *Cogito ergo Zoom*. Moreover, because attendance would clearly become a very fluid concept and there were equity concerns about access to technology, grading was suspended and all courses were perforce declared pass-fail. One could perhaps be forgiven for recalling the cynical chestnut heard in the former Soviet Union: "We pretend to work, and they pretend to pay us." In the new pandemic-ridden educational industrial complex, it was now: "We pretend to teach, and the students pretend to learn."

Yes, I have to admit that it was only by great good luck that, as I slouched off into my emeritus sunset, I was spared the totality of the distance-teaching experience. However, when I accepted the kind invitations of a few colleagues to be class guest — albeit a remote one — in a few courses, I was able to sample at least a taste of the brave new world. I have to confess: Try as I might, it was not my cup of tea.

And though it seemed that most of the students were attempting to be engaged and responsive most of the time, I had the distinct feeling that it was not their chai of choice either. Perhaps an old friend, a farmer, was right when he once told me, "Humans are like logs in a fireplace, they're always better right next to each

other."

Now that the 2019-2020 school year is a distant memory, we are all now trying to make sense of the current school year. My own university decided in late August that all fall-term classes for freshman and sophomores would be taught remotely, effectively banning them from campus. Yet I'm told that other universities, in denial about the pandemic and unconcerned about any Second Wave, have welcome wagons at the campus gates. I suppose we will just have to wait to find out who will prove to have been overly cautious. . .or terribly contrite.

Beyond the tragic health and depressing economic impacts of COVID-19, I suspect that the cataclysmic disruption of the world's post-secondary educational enterprise is one of the great unreported stories of our time. If I was still teaching—and, yes, preaching the promise and potential — of long-form writing, I know a great story I would be sure to assign.

David Abrahamson is a professor emeritus of Journalism at Northwestern University, co-editor of The Routledge Handbook of Magazine Research: The Future of the Magazine Form, and a past president and current ombudsman of IALJS.

TEACHING LITERARY JOURNALISM IN LATIN AMERICA DURING THE COVID PANDEMIC

Now is the time to dig deeper, think more clearly

By Roberto Herrscher, Alberto Hurtado University (Chile)

I look back at the headline I just wrote and gasp. “During?” During, really? Do I really—or wishfully—think that this will be over, completely over some day? If so, when? How are we, our students, our universities, the media and the practice of journalism going to come out of these nightmarish times?

What if “during” never ends, or if it changes the way we do and teach journalism for the rest of our lifetimes? That is probably the hardest part: everything about the future is a huge and smoky enigma.

Until the end of May I used to tell my students in Santiago, Chile: “When all this is over, we will go back to normal, get our boots dirty, meet and spend time with our sources, go places.”

I no longer say that. Instead, I

confide to them that this is how things are now.

Most of us who teach long-format narrative journalism, feature writing, literary reportage in Latin America, have had to change our syllabi, our reading lists, our lessons, exercises and exams at the beginning or in the middle of a maddening semester.

We cannot send our students out into the streets or make them come to our classrooms and newsrooms. We can’t even lure them to use the campus library.

These months have led me to center the work I assign my students to do on five things that are still possible. They can read, especially online. We can search for data, documents, numbers, and make them sing. They can call and write to people and listen attentively to what they

have to say.

They can think and feel and write about our own experiences as we tread the same paths as many of our readers. And they can bond together and work collaboratively, trading the lost freedom to travel for the

teamwork and dialogue which comes when colleagues in different countries and regions connect remotely.

In a recent article for the Harvard Review of Latin America (<https://revista.drclas.harvard.edu/book/pandemic-journalism>) I mentioned examples of Latin American journalists and media that are using these techniques in these months. They are examples of how tools old and new can help reporters and their venues keep track of the news and find new stories and voices in these pandemic times.

The main lesson I have learned trying to teach journalism to students whom I cannot and will not ask to go outside to get the story is that the main task is not to travel far but to think deeply and clearly.

For example: among the millions of voices, images and pieces of information on the bright and the dark sides of the Internet there are dots that nobody has picked together to paint a picture of where we stand.

Another example: out there, there are many people whom the mainstream media do not care to contact who have



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TEACHING LJ IN LATIN AMERICA

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wonderful stories to tell and surprising ideas to share.

A third example: in the dusty bookshelves and crammed drawers of your own house there is an old notebook, a piece of written paper that is turning brown and stiff like an old leaf a black-and-white photo bitten by time that can remind us of that thread we never followed.

Now is a good time to dig deeper, to call that source once again, to open that box of notes and documents to see what was always there but which we never had time to look at.

Last month I asked my students to read books and articles on the Chilean *coup d'état* of 1973 and ask their grandparents or relatives who were young then what they remembered of the military catastrophe that changed the face of their country. Without leaving their homes, they told me they changed their previous assumptions and managed to have conversations with their elders that they had never experienced before and were able to travel far into the past, into many of the sources of what is happening today in

the streets of Chile.

We are in a new semester, and we are still confined and even more afraid. I have just asked our students to tell the stories of the workers who brave the heavy

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winds of the pandemic to distribute food and medicines and even books to clients like me, who are fortunate enough to be able to stay inside and safe.

How is the life of these masked kids on bicycles and motorcycles hurrying about with heavy rucksacks? They have no contract or legal bond to the company they work for, nobody pays or cares if they have an accident or contract the virus. In the streets of Santiago, most of them are immigrants. What does the law say, what do the statistic tell us of their present and plight? What can they tell us about a day in their lives?

Of course, going places and smelling the air and spending time with the people you are writing about is irreplaceable. But there are still a million things we can still do in the virtual classroom and from our rooms.

These are times for resourcefulness and creativity. Whatever comes tomorrow, these qualities will help or even save our students in the future.

The Argentine journalist and professor Roberto Herrscher is the director of the School of Journalism at the Alberto Hurtado University in Santiago, Chile, where he teaches narrative journalism, profiles and feature writing. He is the author of Narrative Journalism, The Art of Listening and The Voyages of the Penelope. He is currently working on a book about the Banana Republics in Central America.

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