

Tell it long take your time go in depth

Some newspapers are giving writers a wealth of time and space, urging them to get intimate with subjects. They call it Immersion Journalism.

The standards that guide newspapers have been updated in some newsrooms to better harmonise with the conventional wisdom of the 1990s:

1. Keep it short – readers have tiny attention spans.
2. Don't dig too deeply – libel and invasion of privacy lawsuits drain profits.
3. Stick to the time-tested definitions of news – crime, politics, sports, celebrities.
4. Keep reporting costs low. Way low.

But some reporters and editors have found an intriguing way to break free from those restraints. A significant and growing number of them are publishing in-depth narratives based on months of high-cost, high-risk immersion journalism. They are injecting real storytelling into their stories, producing memorable narratives, long ones, about the not-so-ordinary aspects of ordinary life.

A case in point is the Baltimore Sun's "A stage in their lives" written by Ken Fuson and published in June last year – a 16 000-word series covering 17 broadsheet pages over six days.

To write "A stage in their lives" he immersed himself for four months in the lives of students playing key roles in their high school's production of *West Side Story*. It was a challenge, and Fuson succeeded. On one level, his series is a tale about the production of a high school musical. On a deeper level it is a masterful story about teenagers coming of age in the complicated 1990s.

Magazines such as *The New Yorker*, *Esquire*, *Sports Illustrated*, and *Rolling Stone* have published this brand of journalism, off and on, for decades. Book publishers in the business of depth journalism have offered outstanding examples from authors such as J Anthony Lukas, Tracy Kidder, and Nicholas Lemann.

Newspapers large enough to publish Sunday magazines occasionally encouraged this kind of writing before the 1990s. Sunday magazines are shrinking, but this form of newspaper journalism is not. These days immersion journalism is finding a safe home – along with occasional controversy – in the broadsheet pages of such papers as the *Seattle Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, *Newsday*, the *St. Petersburg Times*, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, the *Miami Herald*, and the *Providence Journal-Bulletin*, not to mention the *Sun*.

Newspapers are producing valuable, innovative, and sometimes beautiful examples of this against-the-grain kind of work. Writers are drawing readers into what are sometimes the equivalent of books, testing the notion that readers still like to read.

Missionaries

In 1979, at the *Evening Sun*, the morning paper's now-defunct partner, Jon Franklin won the first of two Pulitzer prizes for a work of narrative immersion journalism, "Mrs Kelly's monster".

Franklin had been working up to such an opportuni-

ty. For years at the *Evening Sun* he sought topics that would allow him to use the techniques of fiction "while observing all the journalistic niceties", as he puts it. "I went out and looked for stories that fitted that way of doing it. I practised. I did a story about a day in the life of a dog catcher. I did a day in the life of a profoundly retarded man."

"Mrs Kelly's monster" started out as a feature on a woman undergoing brain surgery. Franklin assumed the surgery would be successful, ending Kelly's 57 years of pain. He interviewed Kelly and her husband. He talked to her daughter separately and with Dr Thomas Barbee Ducker, the surgeon. That was it, he figured, except for showing up at the hospital to look for his ending. Then the surgery went wrong. Kelly died.

Franklin assumed that he had lost his story. Later he had a revelation: he would write about the surgery through Dr Ducker's eyes. The 4 000-word story that emerged opens this way:

Scenes, not just disparate facts, are necessary to write compelling narrative.

In the cold hours of a winter morning Dr Thomas Barbee Ducker, chief brain surgeon at the University of Maryland Hospital, rises before dawn. His wife serves him waffles but no coffee. Coffee makes his hands shake.

In 1985, Franklin won his second Pulitzer for another long-form piece, "The mind fixers" about the new science of molecular psychiatry. Then he left to start a teaching career at the University of Maryland and the University of Oregon. In 1986, his book *Writing for Story* (Atheneum) explained step by step how to practise the kind of journalism that had won him honours.

Donald Drake, the *Philadelphia Inquirer's* medical writer, had parlayed his interest in playwriting to develop his narrative storytelling based on immersion reporting. Five years in a row he spent almost half his time chronicling the successes and disappointments of one class at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine. Eventually the *Inquirer* hired a new medical writer to cover the hard news on the beat so Drake could concentrate on long-form storytelling.

Today, Drake's title is assistant metropolitan editor, and he works with daily reporters, encouraging them to inject storytelling into their quick turnaround pieces.

Chaotic and ordinary

Fuson's "A stage in their lives" is perhaps the most counter intuitive of all the *Sun's* recent narrative immersion stories, since a high school play is by definition both chaotic and ordinary. Indeed, as he hung out

with students day after day, Fuson started worrying about how he would organise the sprawling piece. He found himself with at least 15 characters, too many for a focused narrative. He emerged from his dilemma after a conversation with Lisa Pollak, his *Sun* colleague, who suggested he concentrate on those with the most at stake.

The five students Fuson chose were pictured on each of the six days the story ran, with a soap opera-like caption under each photograph. On day one, the caption under Angie Guido's picture says, "She has a vision of herself in the starring role. But wait – another girl stands in the way". On day two: "She finds out today – is she Maria? No other role will do." And so on.

Part one of the narrative opens like this:

Spellbound she sits, her mother on one side, her boyfriend on the other, as another young woman performs the role that will some day be hers.

Since she was little, Angie Guido has dreamed of standing on stage, playing the Puerto Rican girl who falls in love with the boy named Tony.

Maria.

She will be Maria in *West Side Story*. Say it loud and there's music playing. That's me, mom, she said.

Say it soft and it's almost like praying. It won't be long, Angie thinks as she delights in a touring company production of *West Side Story* at the Lyric Opera House in Baltimore. She and 20

members of the Drama Club from North County High School in Anne Arundel County attend the December show with a few parents. This is a prelude; there is expectant talk they will stage the same show for their spring musical.

Someday soon, Angie hopes, she will own the role that is rightfully hers. She has been a loyal drama club soldier, serving on committees, singing in the chorus when she yearned for a solo, watching lead roles slip away because she didn't look the part. But Maria is short, as she is, and dark, as she is, and more than that, Angie is a senior. This will be her last spring musical. Her last chance to shine.

But on the very next night, in that very same theatre, another girl from North County High School sits spellbound, her mother on one side, her best friend on the other.

She, too, is captivated by the Puerto Rican girl with the pretty voice.

She, too, wonders: What if that were me?

Reader response was overwhelmingly positive. Fuson heard from teenagers who had read every word, from parents who had been captivated. Carroll and Marimow are so certain that their brand of long-form journalism is good business that they are building reporting and editing staffs to do more of it.

When time equals truth

For daily newspapers, with a news cycle that seems to spin ever faster, the most revolutionary of the elements

of immersion/narrative reporting is the immersion itself – the ability to take the time to get it right.

At the St. Petersburg Times, Anne Hull took six months to immerse herself in the lives of a male teenage assailant and a female Tampa police officer whose fates intertwined on 4 July 1992, when the teenager held a gun to her skull and pulled the trigger, although the gun misfired.

Walt Harrington, who left the Washington Post last year to freelance and teach at the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana, says his goal is “to understand other people’s worlds from the inside out, to portray people as they understand themselves. Not the way they say they understand themselves, but the way they really understand themselves. The way, as a subject once told me, you understand yourself ‘when you say your prayers in a quiet room.’”

That kind of understanding rarely comes quickly. In journalism, time sometimes equals truth. Tom Wolfe, in a 1972 essay, called this patient, deep reporting an “essential first move” because scenes, not just disparate facts, are necessary to write compelling narrative.

“Therefore,” Wolfe wrote, “your main problem as a reporter is, simply, managing to stay with whomever you are writing about long enough for the scenes to take place before your own eyes. The initial problem is always to approach total strangers, move in on their lives in some fashion, ask questions you have no natural right to expect answers to, ask to see things you weren’t meant to see. Many journalists find it so ungentlemanly, so embarrassing, so terrifying even, that they are never able to master this.”

Leon Dash almost fell into this trap at the beginning of his work on “When children want children”, his 1986 Washington Post series (expanded into a 1989 book) on why so many urban teenagers became involved in out of wedlock births. It was 13 years ago that he rented a basement room in an economically depressed District of Columbia neighbourhood, struggling to understand a different world by living in it.

He had resisted the suggestion of his Post editor, Bob Woodward, at first, because he thought he already knew many of the answers. As he wrote in the prologue of his book: “I assumed that the high incidence of teenage pregnancy among poor, black urban youths nationwide grew out of youthful ignorance both about birth control methods and adolescent reproductive capabilities. I also thought the girls were falling victim to cynical manipulation by the boys. I was wrong on all counts.”

It was not until five weeks after moving to the Highlands that Dash realised that without immersion he would have missed the truth – that so many of these girls chose pregnancy to gain the attention and respect they were desperate for. The realisation came during an

interview with a 16-year-old girl who was beginning to trust him. It took Dash another year of immersion in the neighbourhood to fill in the gaps. Part of the process is talking to sources again and again. One young woman who told Dash the truth did so in the fifth hour of her third interview.

From 1988 to 1994 Dash spent considerable time on one family. The result was an eight-part Post series titled “Rosa Lee’s Story”, followed by a book. Dash met Rosa Lee Cunningham in 1988. At age 52 she was serving time in the District of Columbia jail for selling heroin. A mother at the age of 14, Rosa Lee had given birth to eight children by five fathers, and had more than 30 grandchildren when she and Dash started talking. Six of her children had followed her into a life of crime.

When Dash suggested that he spend time with her after her release, she agreed, saying maybe her story would help others avoid her path.

Ordinary, extraordinary

A cornerstone of this journalism trend is an emphasis on non-celebrities. They could be called ordinary people, except that journalists choosing them believe part of the job is to find the extraordinary in the ordinary.

The word ‘story’ is often misused in journalism. Not that many newspaper articles are really stories.

Several journalists who focus on non-celebrities cite this quotation from historian Will Durant: “Civilization is a stream with banks. The stream is sometimes filled with blood from people killing, stealing, shouting and doing the things historians usually record; while on the banks, unnoticed, people build homes, make love, raise children, sing songs, write poetry and even whittle statues. The story of civilization is the story of what happened on the banks. Historians are pessimists because they ignore the banks for the river.”

Walt Harrington’s focus on life along the banks is evident from the titles of the three book collections of his pieces: *American Profiles: Somebodies and Nobodies Who Matter*; *At the Heart of It: Ordinary People*, *Extraordinary Lives* (both University of Missouri Press); and *Intimate Journalism: The Art and Craft of Reporting Everyday Life* (Sage). Harrington is puzzled by journalists in general, and at many newspapers in particular, who fail to chronicle the “momentous events of everyday life”. But he recognises that it can be difficult to do. With notable exceptions, Harrington writes in *Intimate Journalism*: “What passes for everyday-life journalism is too often a mishmash of superficial stories about Aunt

Sadie cooking pies; unlikely heroes who save people from drowning or drag them from burning buildings; the nice kid next door who turns out to be a serial killer; and poor people who, against the odds, make it to the top. There’s nothing wrong with such stories, except that too often they are the end point of everyday-life coverage, reported and edited with the left hand by people unschooled and unaware of the intricate assumptions and techniques of intimate journalism, which results in stories made superficial by both accident and design.”

Telling stories

The word “story” is often misused in journalism. Not that many newspaper articles are really stories. They rarely have beginnings, middles, and ends, rarely include foreshadowing, rarely are shot through with narrative drive. That kind of storytelling technique takes years to master.

Tom Wolfe, in a 1972 essay, emphasised four devices: scene-by-scene construction, presenting each scene through the mind of a particular character, extended dialogue between characters, and inclusion of details (how they dress, how they furnish a home, how they treat superiors and subordinates) symbolic of the characters’ status lives.

Although Wolfe’s precepts are alive, it is Jon Franklin’s book *Writing for Story* that almost certainly has influenced the largest number of current newspaper writers, with Harrington’s three books further supplementing it. Franklin, in turn, looks to writers of fiction, and writers who describe fiction techniques. His own bible is Robert Meredith and John Fitzgerald’s *The Professional Story Writer and His Art* (Crowell).

How long, how deep?

Almost any topic worthy of immersion is worthy of lengthy treatment. But discipline is also key. G Wayne Miller, of the Providence Journal-Bulletin, says that without a talented, forceful editor, his stories would sometimes be too long.

Recalling his seven-part immersion series about the Hasbro toy company, he wrote recently, in the paper’s self-published *How I Wrote the Story* collection: “My initial outline was for eight parts, but my editors said ‘too much’. They were right. Thus whittled, my concerns became character development, dramatic tension, detail, and subtext – the ironies and paradoxes, that told the real story.”

The best writers say the real key is the investment of time.

• This article is reprinted with permission from the *Columbia Journalism Review* and the author Steve Weinberg. Weinberg teaches journalism at the University of Missouri. The full text can be found at <http://www.cjr.org/html/98-01-02-long.html>

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