

Case Study 4: What's in a Name? New Journalism, Literary Journalism and Creative Nonfiction

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Introduction

New Journalism, more than anything, can be defined by the age in which it was written. In the 1960s it was born out of the frustration of a small number of American journalists who felt that they could not report the turbulent times in which they lived using conventional methods. The golden age of New Journalism was from 1962 to 1977, an age of counterculture and cataclysmic events. It was the time of the Vietnam War, political assassinations, the shootings at Kent State University, the civil rights movement, the generation gap, women's liberation, sexual permissiveness, rock and roll, recreational drugs—and hippie culture. Writer and journalist Marc Weingarten (2005:6) explains the impact of the New Journalists:

They came to tell us stories about ourselves in ways that we couldn't even begin to fathom, stories about the way life was being lived in the sixties and seventies and what it all meant to us. The stakes were high: deep fissures were rending the social fabric, the world was out of order. So they became our master explainers, our town criers, even our moral conscience—the New Journalists.

The advent of New Journalism

The name 'New Journalism' started to be used in the mid 1960s. According to Tom Wolfe, it was late in 1966 when he first began hearing people talk about the 'new journalism'. The new journalists, he said, were a bunch of 'lumpenproles' with no literary credentials, using all of the techniques of novelists, while still 'doing their low-life legwork,' ignoring the literary class lines that had been almost a century in the making (Wolfe 1975:39–40).

The title of Wolfe's edited anthology, *The New Journalism*, first published in 1973, brought the term into public consciousness. This book included the works of Hunter S. Thompson, Joan Didion, Gay Talese, John Sack, Michael Herr, Jimmy Breslin, Terry Southern, Joe Eszterhas, Barbara L. Goldsmith, Garry Wills, George Plimpton, James Mills, Garry Wills, Rex Reed and Nicholas Tomalin, as well as established writers Truman Capote and Norman Mailer.

Tom Wolfe: father of New Journalism

Journalist Tom Wolfe was one of the first to find a radical new way to describe the times in which he lived. After graduating from Yale University in the 1950s with a doctorate in American Studies,

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Wolfe went on to have a ten-year career as a newspaper journalist. For six months in 1960 he served as the *Washington Post's* Latin American correspondent, and won the Washington Newspaper Guild's foreign news prize for his coverage of Cuba. In 1962, Wolfe became a reporter for the *New York Herald-Tribune*. In 1965, he completed his first book, *Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*, a collection of articles previously published in *The New Yorker* and *Esquire*. The book was a bestseller, establishing Wolfe as a leading figure in the literary experiments of nonfiction, and as one of the founders of New Journalism.

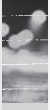
Wolfe's New Journalism captured the reader's attention with its vivid, intense prose, a writing style that broke all the old rules of form, style and content. It discarded such journalistic constraints as a strict word count and the inverted pyramid style of reporting. New Journalists could write pieces as long as 40,000 words or as short as 3000 words. Wolfe was not only very serious about his intention to create a new style of writing, but he also had literary ambitions—he did not see himself as merely creating a new and radical style of journalism, but more as the creator of a form of writing that would rival the novel for literary supremacy. In *The New Journalism* (1975:15), he argues for the literary supremacy of creative nonfiction over the novel, provocatively beginning the anthology:

I doubt if many of the aces I will be extolling in this story went into journalism with the faintest notion of creating a 'new' journalism, a 'higher' journalism, or even a mildly improved variety. I know they never dreamed that anything they were going to write for newspapers or magazines would wreak such evil havoc in the literary world ... causing a panic, dethroning the novel as the number one literary genre, starting the first new direction in American literature in half a century ... Nevertheless that is what has happened.

Wolfe maintained that, at the time, fiction writers were 'busy running backward, skipping and screaming, into a begonia patch' that he called 'Neo-Fabulism' (Wolfe 1975:11). He said that the 'retrograde state of contemporary fiction' had made it far easier to make his point that 'the most important literature being written in America today is in nonfiction, in the form that has been tagged, however ungracefully, the New Journalism'. No one, he said, was used to thinking of reporting as having an aesthetic dimension' (Wolfe 1975:24). He audaciously claimed that journalists writing in the new style would 'wipe out the novel as literature's main event' (Wolfe 1975:12).

Wolfe's New Journalism is distinctive for its use of four basic literary devices:

- ▮ scene-by-scene construction with a spare back story
- ▮ the reader is provided with multiple points of view, not just the writer's point of view within the story (see, for example, 'The First Tycoon of Teen', Wolfe 1975)
- ▮ the use of extensive dialogue
- ▮ the recording the minutiae of people's lives, providing details of the verbal and nonverbal symbols that represent a character's lifestyle to create a representation of a person's 'status life'.



Tip

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Try writing up an interview you have conducted in Wolfe's New Journalism style using Wolfe's literary strategies as a guideline. How difficult is it to write from the subject's perspective? Do you feel there are any ethical dilemmas in writing a piece of journalism from the viewpoint of the internal thoughts of your subject?

One of Wolfe's earliest articles in the new journalism style was his magazine story on music producer Phil Spector, 'The First Tycoon of Teen'. Wolfe's story provided an insight into Spector's thoughts in a 'virtual stream of consciousness' (Wolfe 1975:33). One of the news magazines claimed that the story was an improbable feat, but Spector rejects their claim, saying that the story is accurate. According to Wolfe, this should have come as no surprise, since 'every detail in the passage was taken from a long interview with Spector about exactly how he had felt at the time' (Wolfe 1975:33).

The article begins with Wolfe describing Spector's thoughts about the raindrops on the plane window: 'All these raindrops are high or something. They don't roll down the window, they come straight back, toward the tail, wobbling, like all those Mr Cool snowheads walking on mattresses. The plane is taxiing out toward the runway to take off, and this stupid inflected water wobbles, sideways, across the window' (Wolfe 1975:34). Wolfe said that, in writing this piece, he felt a 'Ruskin sense' of 'looking at all things fresh' for the first time and that he believed he was doing things that no one had ever done before in journalism (Wolfe 1975:34).

What is New Journalism?

Are we any closer to understanding what exactly is this new form of journalism Wolfe so provocatively claimed as the new fiction in 1973? Is it the same as literary journalism or creative nonfiction? The problem with the genre, if indeed it is one, is that it defies definition. In recent years, the term New Journalism has come to be used interchangeably with literary journalism, creative nonfiction and narrative journalism to describe feature and book-length journalism that steps outside traditional news formats and engages the reader by using literary devices, borrowed from fiction, that capture the reader's attention as much for the style as for the content.

Even those in the profession find it hard to define just exactly what New Journalism, literary fiction and **creative nonfiction** are, and whether they all mean the same thing. Matthew Ricketson

Creative nonfiction:

fact-based writing that combines the story elements of fiction with the truth-telling elements of traditional journalism.

Parajournalism:

journalism that is not really journalism—*New Yorker* staff writer Dwight Macdonald's derogatory term for Tom Wolfe's style of journalism.

(2004), Australian media commentator, journalist and former academic, says, for instance, that literary journalism blurs the line between New Journalism and literary fiction, citing Tom Wolfe's book on the American astronaut program in the 1950s and 1960, *The Right Stuff*, as an example, not of New Journalism, but of literary journalism. Ricketson (2004) says it is far easier to recognise literary journalism than it is to define it.

Don't be confused by the similarity in these definitions. All of these genres—if that is what they are—have one thing in common: a difficulty in defining them. It brings to mind that Shakespearean question: 'What's in a name? That which we call a rose/By any other name would smell as sweet' (*Romeo and Juliet* II, ii, 1–2).

Gonzo journalist: Hunter S. Thompson

When famed gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson (see also Case Study 3) killed himself in 2005, one newspaper misprinted that the self-styled 'gonzo' journalist wanted his ashes 'fired from a canon' (a member of the Christian clergy). Thompson would have appreciated the irony: a conventional hard news report slipping unintentionally into the realms of the weird and bizarre, a subject matter he captured so compellingly in his particular style of New Journalism.

Hunter Stockton Thompson, who was born in Kentucky in 1937, began his journalism career as a sports journalist. Thompson's first book, *The Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga*, was the result of a year he spent following the motorcycle gang Hell's Angels around America. Tom Wolfe describes the result as 'manic, highly adrenal first-person style in which Thompson's own emotions continually dominate the story' (Wolfe 1975:195). The subject for Thompson's first piece of magazine gonzo journalism was a seemingly innocuous event: a race meeting. Thompson was assigned to cover the Kentucky Derby, one of the world's great horse races. However, the Derby in 1970 coincided with political unrest and the calling of the National Guard to protect Yale University from the threat of a Black Panther riot. It was also at the time of Nixon's expansion of the Vietnam War into Cambodia, and the killing of students at Kent State University.

Thompson could not reconcile the glamour and ceremony of Derby Day with what was happening in the world beyond. He saw the Derby as a reflection of America at its myopic worst, he was outraged, and his aim was to 'outrage his readers and commit mayhem on the event' (Novoa 1979:40). Gonzo journalism was born out of Thompson's alternative to armed revolution, 'a literary Molotov cocktail' (Novoa 1979:40).

In 'The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved' (Wolfe 1975), Thompson juxtaposes real and imaginary events, blurring the distinction between fact and fiction until the reader is unsure about what is real and what is a product of Thompson's mind. Thompson creates a camera-eye technique of reporting in which he sees his unedited notes as *the story*, selecting details and interpreting events and making notes, not just about what he observed, but also about what he was thinking about what he observed. The result is subjective and stark, with often cruel observations: 'Pink faces with a stylish sag, old Ivy styles, seersucker coats and button-down collars ... burnt out early or maybe just not much to burn in the first place' (Wolfe 1975: 207). In Thompson's writing, subjectivity replaces objectivity, turning upside down the old rule of

impartiality in journalism. In 'The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved', we see Thompson's stream-of-consciousness style, written directly, in this instance, from the 'big red notebook' that he carried with him. He says the notebook 'itself is somewhat mangled and bent; some of the pages are torn, others are shrivelled and stained by what appears to be whiskey, but taken as a whole, with sporadic memory flashes, the notes seem to tell the story' (Wolfe 1975:205).

Thompson regarded politics as a blood sport, and politicians as fair game. In *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*, he described the campaign leading up to Richard Nixon's re-election as president as 'brutal' and 'depraved'. He accused Senator Ed Muskie of being placed under the influence of a psychoactive drug, and mocked candidate and Senator Hubert H. Humphrey, calling him 'the Hump'. Thompson despaired at the inevitable victory of Richard Nixon, writing: 'Jesus, where will it end? How low do you have to stoop in this country to become president?' (Sullivan 2007).

Other journalists who covered the 1972 political campaign remembered Thompson for his outrageous antics. CNN national correspondent Bruce Morton recalled Thompson as a 'bigger-than-life presence who wrote "good stuff"' (CNN 2005):

He'd perked the campaign plane or the campaign bus up a whole lot, he'd come out and say ... weird stuff's going to happen ... He was also, it's fair to say, a very good writer. You read his stuff in *Rolling Stone* magazine, and maybe it wasn't what you've seen and maybe it wasn't what had happened, but by golly, it was good stuff and it was fun' (CNN 2005).

A *Rolling Stone* report on the 2004 presidential campaign, in which Thompson called George Bush a 'treacherous little freak', showed that Thompson in his latter years had lost none of his irreverence. He wrote that he almost felt sorry for Bush's lacklustre performance in a debate with John Kerry, until he heard someone call him 'Mister President', then, he wrote, 'I felt ashamed' (Sullivan 2007). It is true to say, as *Rolling Stone* journalist James Sullivan claims, that the 'dean of gonzo journalism gave the phrase "fear and loathing" its cultural relevancy' (Sullivan 2007).

Like Wolfe, Thompson also wrote fiction, the most famous of which was his darkly comic altered-states novel *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, first published in *Rolling Stone* in 1971, and regarded as a 'perspicacious, seminal, nonpareil, virtuoso work, the kind of thing that sends you to the dictionary for a word that does it ...' (O'Rourke, 'Fear'). Thompson's larger-than-life persona was brought to a new audience in 1998 when *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* was made into a film with the part of Hunter played by Johnny Depp.

Thompson's writing was always as much about Thompson, the man, as it was about the subject of his journalism. He never renounced his wild, licentious lifestyle, once famously saying: 'I hate to advocate drugs, alcohol, violence or insanity to anyone, but they've always worked for me' (Sullivan 1996).

The old 'New Journalism'

If New Journalism means innovation in the form and style of journalistic writing, then long before the radical journalism of Wolfe, Thompson and others in the 1960s and '70s, journalists were

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creating new journalism that challenged the reporting style of their time. Eighteenth-century journalist Jonathan Swift was an early innovator. His reports, savagely critical of the abject state of English politics in the 1720s, exposed what he saw as the evil of Great Britain's foreign policy, in particular its harsh policies against the Irish. His satirical writing, laced with a mordant humour, is equal to any of Hunter S. Thompson's vituperative reportage of 200 years later.

A century after Swift, Charles Dickens was establishing new ground with his reports on life in London in the 1830s. In 'Street Sketches', written under the pseudonym 'Boz', Dickens created powerful vignettes based on the lives of ordinary people—shopkeepers, bank clerks, bakers, laundresses—the great silent majority who were rarely noticed by the press unless they found themselves the perpetrators or victims of a newsworthy crime, or the unlucky victims of a disaster or accident. Dickens's writing existed in a 'shadow region between speculative fiction and reportage, which gave him the licence to write about the inner lives of his characters with great specificity' (Weingarten 2005:11).

A century later, George Orwell would model his reportage of the poor and disadvantaged on Dickens's journalism. Orwell's biographer, Bernard Crick, says Orwell admired Dickens's talent for 'telling small lies in order to emphasize what he regards as a big truth' (Crick 1992: 12).

William Stead

In the 1880s, another journalist, William Stead, took up the cause of the poor and oppressed when he became editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, a London evening newspaper founded in February 1865 by Frederick Greenwood and George Smith. Stead created what was widely regarded at the time as a 'new journalism' style. He wanted to bring news to the masses and engage them with stories printed in an easily readable format, accompanied by illustrations, diagrams and maps. Under his editorship, the newspaper moved away from its original purpose, which was to publish political and social commentary and opinion about the news of the day, and embraced a radical new style of journalism, which featured banner headlines, shorter paragraphs and human interest stories.

Stead championed many causes of the day, encouraging his journalists to write stories based on interviews rather than observations. In 1883, the year he took over as editor, the newspaper ran a series of articles on child prostitution. Two years later he exposed the white slave trade, highlighting the case of a thirteen-year-old girl, Eliza Armstrong, who had been bought for £5 by a woman working for a London brothel. When Stead rescued the girl from the brothel owner, he was arrested and charged with abduction, and sentenced to three months' imprisonment in Holloway Gaol. His journalism, however, caused a public outcry, and led to the passing of the *Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885*, which raised the age of consent from thirteen to sixteen.

Tit-Bits

At the same time that Stead was campaigning for social justice with his 'new journalism', another English newspaperman, George Newnes, was creating a style of journalism that would provide a counterbalance to Stead's campaigning journalism, and which would in many ways

be the forerunner of today's tabloid newspapers. In 1881, Newnes started a new sixteen-page weekly penny paper called *Tit-Bits*, a reference to the paper's brief and highly dramatic and sentimental stories. *Tit-Bits* was an early model for today's tabloid format, with its mixture of infotainment, brief sensational news stories, advice columns, short stories, letters, and contests and promotions. The paper quickly found a market, selling an average of 500,000 copies a week. The paper's best-known promotion was the *Tit-Bits* insurance scheme, which offered £100 to the family of any *Tit-Bits* reader killed in a railway accident and on whose body was found a copy of the newspaper. By 1891, there had been thirty-six payouts. Such was the paper's popularity that several famous authors made reference to *Tit-Bits* in their novels, including James Joyce in *Ulysses*, George Orwell in *Animal Farm* and H. G. Wells in *The First Men in the Moon*.

Jack London and George Orwell

At the dawn of the twentieth century, American journalist Jack London went under cover to chronicle the lives of the working class in London's East End. London, like Stead before him, set out to write an exposé of life in what was then regarded as the most deprived slum in the world. *The People of the Abyss*, first published in 1904, was advocacy journalism, stripped of any pretence at objectivity.

Twenty years later George Orwell—pseudonym of Eric Blair—was publishing journalism that captured the reader's attention with its spare, striking prose. Like Charles Dickens and William Stead before him, Orwell wanted to write about London's forsaken; like Jack London, he chose to discard his middle-class life and live among the people he wrote about: 'I wanted to submerge myself, to get right down among the oppressed; to be one of them and on their side against the tyrants' (Crick 1992: 13). The result was two books, *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1931) and *On the Road to Wigan Pier* (1937).

We see, then, that generations of journalists, from Swift in the eighteenth century to Orwell in the twentieth century, challenged the journalism of their age, and in so doing laid down the foundation for the high profile New Journalism of the 1960s and '70s.

The New Journalism in Australia

Australia's literary journalism heritage dates back to the early days of the *Bulletin*, with the journalism of Henry Lawson and A. B. 'Banjo' Paterson. Media academic Denis Cryle (2001:2–7) says the iconoclasm of the *Bulletin* played a part in inventing and developing the 'irreverent satire' that came out of Richard Walsh's *Nation Review* in the 1970s. Journalist and writer Mark Mordue (ABC 2005) says that Australia in the 1960s produced its own New Journalism style in the 'kind of irreverent tone, that kind of larrikin voice in publications like *Oz* ... when Richard Neville was at the helm'. Denis Cryle says that Australian New Journalists in the 1970s drew on local traditions to create their own distinctive brand of iconoclasm' (Cryle 2001:2). According to Cryle, Richard Walsh, as editor and leading instigator of *Nation Review* in the 1970s, sought to 'redefine the relationship between writers and readers to break down the aura of impersonality

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which surrounded most daily journalism of the period' (Cryle 2001:2). Australian New Journalism, unlike the revolutionary New Journalism coming out of America at the time, was, according to former *Nation Review* journalist Mungo MacCallum, 'much more evolutionary than its often revolutionary and celebrated American equivalent' (Cryle 2001:2). In more recent times journalist and former media academic Matthew Ricketson (2004) regards John Bryson's *Evil Angels* (1985) and Helen Garner's *First Stone* (1995) as fine examples of Australian literary journalism.

Conclusion

So we now have an overview of the history of New Journalism—but where does it fit in the world of journalism today? Australian journalist Margaret Simons (ABC 2005) questions the difference between feature writing and literary journalism, arguing that the distinctions between them are difficult to find. She has a problem with the title 'literary journalism', and would like to see 'a little bit more emphasis on the fact that the best of it is not just nice writing for the sake of nice writing, but finding things out' (ABC 2005). She is also uncomfortable about the term 'creative nonfiction', arguing that it is not very satisfactory because 'it seems ... to concentrate mostly on what it isn't' (ABC 2005). Simons is more comfortable with the term 'narrative reportage', because narrative, she says, is one of the distinguishing features of this style of journalism.

Journalism, she says, is still regarded by most people as a pretty lowly occupation, and to some degree, she argues, there's a good reason for that:

Journalism, finding things out, is actually very dirty work. Interviewing is very dirty work. When it's done well, it is always on the ethical edge, it almost always makes people seriously angry. Much more angry than expressions of opinion do.

And so one of my other problems with literary journalism is that literary, in this country at least, implies something that's a bit stratospheric and up there and away from all the dirt and the pull. Well, journalism if it's to matter at all, has to stay dirty, in the sense that I mean it (ABC 2005).

Whether you call it New Journalism, literary journalism, creative nonfiction, feature writing, narrative journalism or narrative reporting, the best print journalism describes society to itself and grabs our attention through vibrant, engaging prose which reflects the times in which we live.

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