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To ‘shift into the eye sockets of the people in the story’: Teaching magazine feature writing through literary journalism

Abstract:

In a postgraduate writing subject in a media and communications program, we seek to teach a type of writing that – we argue – can compete successfully for readers’ attention in today’s 360-degree media environment. In order to meet this challenge, we focus on literary/narrative feature writing, most commonly found in Australia and elsewhere in magazines, and in the magazine supplements of mainstream newspapers. In teaching this type of writing, we examine both its microstructure and macrostructure. At the macrostructural level, we commence with the historical context of literary journalism and feature story writing, focussing especially on the major influence of the New Journalism and practitioners such as Tom Wolfe; alongside this we review the argument that the ‘storytelling’ structure is a form to which humans respond innately, a knowledge of which can aid effective media writing in general, and magazine feature stories in particular, and to this end we demonstrate the type of textual analyses that form part of our pedagogical approach. At the microstructural level, we examine the employment of narrative perspective in order to engage readers in specific ways; this aligns to some extent with Wolfe’s ‘device’ of ‘point of view’, which he considered crucial in order to ‘grab the reader a few seconds longer’ (Wolfe 1973: 18). Another related aspect which, Wolfe argued, is essential in attracting and involving readers is filtering descriptions through the ‘eye sockets’ (Wolfe 1973: 18) of people in his features. Following Wolfe, we argue that this type of literary feature yields a wealth of engaging information unparalleled in other media writing.

Biographical notes:

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Introduction

This story begins, like all good stories, with a random meeting of two people (the two authors, in fact): a media researcher and a journalist, at the University of Melbourne, in 2010. They then found themselves collaboratively devising a new writing subject for the Masters program in Media and Communications. This article tells the story of the conversations and content that ended up constructing this subject, interwoven wherever possible with empirical observations from our first three semesters of team-teaching it.

We knew we needed to tailor the content of this subject to a totally mediatised, fast-moving, globalized world, with extremely converged, proliferating, interactive media forms; in particular our first world society is one in which it is almost impossible to escape the certainty that information technologies have totally networked our world (Hassan 2008), so that our everyday lives are lived in a 360-degree media environment. It is an environment, if not a whole world, in which we cannot focus on words for long before a seductive moving image or some titillating snippet will appear alongside our visual focus, well inside our peripheral vision, bobbing up and down until we click on it, or zoom off only to be replaced by another. We could be forgiven for seeing this world as one in which words have become obsolete, in which images rule. Images are certainly crucial, whether still, moving or interactive, but we humans do seem to continue to need words. The written word, whether in print or pixels, is still of great importance to us. But many of the contexts in which words are now offered and received did not exist prior to the birth of even our current crop of students, or else have changed dramatically in the last few years, will continue to change, and are almost constantly changing before our very eyes.

In devising our subject on new media writing, then, we felt it was important to take this continuous fluidity and change into account. To do this, we decided on teaching specific techniques that could be used to empower writing across a range of media platforms, but which are found exemplified most fully in quality ‘magazine writing’ – whether on paper or online, whether enhancing more traditional newspapers stories, or forming the entirety of a full feature article in popular Australian publications such as the *Good weekend* or the *Monthly*.

In order to attune students to the need to be able to survive as writers across media platforms we expose them to excellent examples of online features that use multimedia and push the boundaries of the genre into what was until recently uncharted territory. An example of this is John Branch’s Pulitzer Prize winning article, ‘Snowfall: The Avalanche at Tunnel Creek’ (2012). With its sweeping panoramic views of the mountains, interviews with a survivor, embedded skiing videos and detailed maps, it exemplifies the possibilities of online media.

There are a growing number of sites that are devoted to narrative journalism, such as longform.org and the Niemen Storyboard. Since we began teaching this subject in second semester 2010, we have extended the subject’s ‘target publication’ from mainstream newspapers’ magazine sections to online outlets. The inclusion of online publications allows students to take advantage of the tools of the Internet, such as

hyperlinks, while still learning to write to a deadline and within a strict word limit. We also discuss how data journalism has the possibility of enriching the students' writing, using examples such as *The age* newspaper's analysis of 24 years of road toll figures (Carey & Butt: 2012). Drawing on an interview with data expert Craig Butt (Martin 2012) and an analysis by Fairfax journalist Geoff Wright (2013) we examine the challenges of this aspect of online journalism, in particular the technical and research skills required by the writer.

By 'magazine writing', then, we are not confining ourselves to writing found in hardcopy magazines, but use the term rather more generically to mean 'literary/narrative journalism', a *style* of writing that many media theorists believe has the ingredients to keep people reading (Zdovc 2008b: 9; Taylor 2005; Ricketson 2004: 236). Assuming these theorists are correct – and we argue that they are – this is a style of writing that is able to compete with the continuous distraction of the 360-degree media environment, as we will elaborate below. The major part of this style's strength is derived from its narrative component, offering something to which humans innately respond – storytelling (Fisher 1987; Boje 2008; Gottschall 2012).

The narrative feature article and the civic function

The capacity of narrative to heighten reader engagement is largely effected, according to Zdovc (2008b), by the forward motion of narrative. Writing from a Central European perspective, Zdovc, a researcher and journalist/editor, sees narrative/literary journalism as providing deeper coverage of issues facing us, and having a civic mission – helping citizens understand each other and 'get along together'. It is this domain of social beliefs that Bruner argues is in the main organised narratively (1991: 21), so it is logical to argue that narrative journalism is going to give us deeper information in ways that we will want to read (Zdovc 2008b). Similarly, the special power of storytelling to engage the emotions and to help people make sense of things has been identified by other researchers in the area of narrative journalism (Allan, Fairtlough & Heinzen 2002). As Gottschall argues, 'Story ... continues to fulfil its ancient function of bringing society together by reinforcing a set of common values and strengthening the ties of common culture' (2012: 137).

As this subject can be taken as part of the honours year or as an elective in several Masters' programs in the Arts Faculty, in our view it is important that students engage with, research and write about topics that are not only 'news' in the wider sense of the word, but also have an inherent civic function. Matthew Ricketson, in his book *Writing feature stories*, similarly argues that engaging in civic journalism is a way to avoid the superficiality often associated with features (2004: 229). This is 'journalism [that] has an obligation to public life – an obligation that goes beyond just telling the news or unloading loads of facts. The way we do our journalism affects the way public life goes. Journalism can help empower a community or it can help disable it', according to the Pew Center for Civic Journalism. Discussing his own feature articles, which engage very much with civic concerns, renowned writer Arnold Zable says this type of writing is about 'witnessing' events in society, 'listening' to the stories of

others, and then telling these stories, making emotional connections so that as wide a range of readers as possible can understand complex societal issues (Zable 2013). Zable's own narrative features have told the stories of many asylum seekers and refugees, including representatives from the small number of survivors from the 'SIEV-X', a boat overloaded with refugees on its way to Australia in 2011, which sank resulting in the deaths of the majority of passengers, including many babies and children (see, for example, Zable 2011). Because we set these parameters regarding subject matter, students are necessarily directed to certain types of magazine – whether paper or online. As mentioned above, the *Monthly* and the *Good weekend* serve as our main models and 'default' target publications, but there are others that publish the type of magazine features we are teaching, and we encourage students to seek these out.

Significantly, the movement of human beings around the world, with the tragedies and the joys that inevitably accompany it, has been a topic from the very first days of the feature article – whether for magazines or newspapers. The feature story seems to have originated in the 1860s with an American newspaper editor named Charles A Dana, editor of *The New York tribune*, who initiated the concept of 'human interest stories' (Hartsock 2000: 127). By this, Dana meant that he wanted not just facts but colour and description. For example, instead of statistics about the number of immigrants to the US, he wanted articles showing 'the human side of immigration' (Zdovc 2008a: 64) – the hardships of unemployment, language barriers and so on, and equally the colour and descriptions of the success stories. But most publishers and newspaper editors still wanted impersonal, factual journalism. By the early 1900s, though, 'a more subjective style of reporting developed' (Zdovc 2008a: 11), although it was still quite rare in the first half of the twentieth century. The feature article was gradually affected by literary journalism, and eventually, by the 1960s and '70s, became much more widespread, thanks to a movement retrospectively labelled New Journalism, as well as referred to as narrative or literary journalism. Whatever the label, and despite this type of journalism being regarded as 'soft' news, this was an attempt by various individuals and groups of American journalists to tell the news differently; the central people in this movement were Gay Talese, Tom Wolfe, Joan Didion and Norman Mailer, among others. They wanted to describe scenes, including what people actually said to each other about various real events; they wanted different points of view. In other words, they wanted their news reports to be more like a dramatic story. To quote one of these journalists, Gay Talese:

I wanted to tell the hard news through people ... I wrote about the fire through the dialogue of the people talking to one another. And the firemen were down there and the dog was barking and the hoses were all over the street and the traffic was blocked. It was a scene. So this one- or two-bell fire became a feature story (2001, qtd. in Zdovc 2008a: xv).

The wider context

Students' understanding of the characteristics of the feature can be further deepened by critiquing the criteria developed by Taylor (2005). While the elements Taylor outlines – 'campaign ... entertain ... shock, explain, reveal, respond, caution, inspire, inform, enlighten' – are useful in providing a broad template to guide the students, in reality these may overlap. We argue that Taylor's employment of four functional fields – info-based, opinion-making ('features with attitude'), entertainment, literary journalism (118) – create false distinctions which the students need to be mindful of, while noting that the best features almost always contain literary and or narrative devices. We stress that the terms 'feature article' and 'literary journalism', while often vaguely defined, are not synonymous. Rather, the term 'feature' is the genre or form and 'literary journalism' a technique that encompasses various devices. Most newspaper and magazine writing (whether paper, online or both) has been strongly influenced by literary journalism to some degree. The very detailed, intimate, story-like feature articles are a type of literary journalism, but some feature articles – such as reviews – will have fewer of its characteristics.

The appeal that general feature articles have to a wide readership compared to so-called hard news, needs to be seen in the context of Australian readership, the main feature of which is that magazines are not – according to the latest figures – declining as fast as hardcopy newspaper readership is. In Australia there are 700 magazine titles and around 3,000 international titles. Approximately \$1.2 billion is spent on magazines in Australia each year and 80.3 per cent of Australians over 18 read magazines (77.5 per cent men and 83.9 per cent women). For the past few years in Australia magazine supplements are seen as the main reason that the sales of paper versions have not fallen as quickly as the other two major Anglophone markets in the United Kingdom and the United States, which, on average, have declined about 10 per cent per year for the past seven years. It is only really since the second half of 2011 that the readership of Australian hardcopy newspapers has been falling more heavily (Knott 2013).

Although our subject has a strong focus on the American tradition of narrative journalism, we situate this within a wider framework, pointing out that while the Pulitzer Prize did not introduce a prize for feature writing until 1978, the Australian equivalent, the Walkley Awards, has included features since its inception in 1956 (Hurst 1988: 434). We also remind students that many of the anxieties being expressed about the drop in standards of writing found on the Internet sound very similar to the kinds of criticism Tom Wolfe said was levelled at 'New Journalism' in the 1960s, and the criticism of the novel when it first emerged in the 18th century. In each case the new form is seen as 'superficial', 'ephemeral', 'mere entertainment' and 'morally irresponsible' (Wolfe 1973: 36). In our view, this is why the history of different types of media writing is so useful for us today as it enables us to see these same sorts of anxieties expressed with each new form of technology, set in wider cultural contexts and in the cultural forms that it generates.

Writing devices

To deepen the understanding of the techniques of literary journalism the students are given writing exercises in the tutorials. First we unpack what Tom Wolfe calls his ‘four devices’. These are ‘scene-by-scene construction’; ‘realistic dialogue’; point of view, that is, ‘presenting every scene through the eyes of a particular character’ to give the reader the feeling of being ‘inside the character’s mind ...’; and symbols of people’s ‘status life’, that is, the ‘recording of everyday gestures, habits, manners customs, styles of furniture, decoration’ (1973: 31–32). This last device, as Wolfe says, is the one that ‘has always been least understood’, so to facilitate understanding we ask students to write a few paragraphs about someone they know, using only those sorts of outward markers. By describing the physical characteristics of a person, how they dress, how they hold themselves, what objects they have around them, students begin to explore the important role that attention to detail plays in literary journalism. We examine the effect of this detail in the writing of not only Wolfe but also Jon Franklin, the winner of the first Pulitzer Prize for a feature (in 1979) for his piece, ‘Mrs Kelly’s monster’, seeking the exact words and phrases that enable it to construct a very strong and emotional connection to the reader. The writer had clearly been present at Mrs Kelly’s operation and had also researched it very carefully. He told the story by way of third-person narration, and made a gruesome and difficult topic absolutely gripping. Our close textual analysis serves to show the students how ‘New Journalism’ – a term that Wolfe himself rejected – has become an accepted writing style, and even one that Zdovc, a researcher as well as an editor of an online publication, argues could function as a way for journalism to transform itself in ‘the fight’ against declining readership of newspapers and magazines (2008b: 7).

Zdovc’s concern, in common with other media theorists concerned with ethics (see, for example, Couldry 2006), is not just about print media’s winning ‘the fight’ financially, but with democratic purposes; they see, as we do, such journalism having a strong civic function. If we apply this to ‘Mrs Kelly’s monster’, it is not about a current event so much as a type of event that occurs in our midst all the time. The article shows us the human side of it – and from a rare point of view, that of the surgeon. Clearly, when compared with plain news writing, literary/narrative journalism is much more likely to be able to reach out and draw readers in, often by affecting them emotionally. Wolfe describes how he was always thinking about what would attract readers. According to his account, at first he tried ‘any device that might conceivably grab the reader a few seconds longer’ (Wolfe 1973: 17). This is quite different to cheap sensationalism, as Wolfe puts great emphasis on the concepts of ‘truth’ and ‘objectivity’. These concepts can be vague and ill-defined, both in media writing practice and in the literature. To redress this, we stress to students the importance of accuracy and fairness in all journalism. Inevitably questions are asked about how ‘truthful’ students’ feature articles must be, to which they are given the unequivocal response that no part of their work can be fabricated. Students do come to understand this but in the early part of the course they can become a little too immersed in the ‘literary’ side of the genre and neglect the tenets of good journalism.

In 2014, we are more than ever trying ‘any device that might conceivably grab the reader a few seconds longer’, and principally for the same reason as Wolfe – not wanting to bore the reader – but facing greater competition than at any other time in the history of print media. Wolfe criticised what he called the centuries-old British tradition – the calm, cultivated, genteel voice, like ‘off-white or putty colored walls’. The main attribute of this writing was ‘understatement’ – readers were bored, he says, without understanding why (Wolfe 1973: 16). The strong and individualist narrator of literary/narrative journalism is one of the main devices for mitigating boredom by involving readers, sometimes even speaking to them directly. This is an effective device – depending on the subject matter of the article – for bringing readers into the story. But Wolfe’s main concern was to get the reader to ‘shift into the eye sockets of the people in the story’ (Wolfe 1973: 18). This resonates with Talese’s objective mentioned above, about wanting to tell the news ‘through people’. This shift, to telling the story through people’s eye-sockets, can happen when the writing in general is so vivid and intimate, with the point of view strongly aligned to what the story’s main characters would be thinking in any particular context. This of course requires a great deal of research, and a depth of information that takes time. Writers of these features have to be much more observant than they do for even regular journalism, spending more time with their subjects and conducting longer and more in-depth interviews.

As one example of this, we take the interview feature Wolfe wrote on Phil Spector, in the early 1960s. This article was the result of hours of interviews with Spector. Readers said at the time that the level of detail was so deep that it could not possibly be true, but after reading it, Spector himself declared that it was. Note how we are inside Spector’s head from the first lines:

All these raindrops are high on something. They don’t roll down the window, they come straight back, toward the tail, wobbling ... The plane is taxiing out towards the runway to take off, and this stupid infracted water wobbles, sideways, across the window. Phil Spector, 23 years old, the rock and roll magnate ... America’s first teenage tycoon, watches ... this watery pathology ... it is sick, fatal. He tightens his seat belt over his bowels (Wolfe 1973: 20).

While this narrative is certainly told from the perspective of Spector’s ‘eye sockets’, it is important to note that it is still ‘third person narration’, albeit ‘close’ third person (similar to the technique used in ‘Mrs Kelly’s monster’), by which is meant that the narrative is structured in such a way as to give readers close access to the thoughts of the main character, heightening their imaginative identification with this character (Lee 2011: 203).

Narratological concepts

This construction of close access for imaginative identification is – we argue – what Talese meant about telling the news ‘through people’, and what Wolfe meant about wanting to write in a way that shifts the reader ‘into the eye sockets’ of, usually, the main character, but sometimes other characters as well. The character through whose

‘eye sockets’ a story is told is known in narratology as the focal character, the one who ‘sees’ in a given narrative, with the necessarily careful construction of this ‘seeing’ character being known as the overall *focalisation* of the story (Genette 1998). The focalisation can shift within a narrative, although not randomly: there need to be good reasons for it. For example, if a writer is told a story by one person, he cannot then write the story in the first person, as if he himself experienced the events, if he did not. Nevertheless, even when the main character is telling his story, the writer (more properly known as the ‘implied author’, see Booth 1983) will often place herself in the narrative as an I-character, for example as the interviewee, so that there is a sort of double focalisation constructed: the reader is given direct access to the implied author’s point of view, and at the same time can be granted close access to the consciousness of the main character within the story that the author is telling. Indeed, this type of construction now seems to be a dominant trend in magazine features, with the implied author referring to herself or himself as ‘I’. In his analysis of media texts told in the first person, McNair states that this type of narrative perspective (or focalisation) is being seen as the ‘miracle ingredient’ to keep readers reading articles (McNair 2008: 18). He does not explain why, but in our view it must surely have something to do with the fact that if the writing is sufficiently powerful, readers are shifted into the eye sockets of the I-narrator, watching and listening to the subject of the interview, creating a much more engaged reading experience than would be the case simply browsing from one article to the next, reading only headlines or first paragraphs, maybe clicking on a few links, but never becoming really engaged.

A good example of shifting focalisation – for important ethical reasons – can be seen in Robert Fisk’s famous investigative feature ‘Is this some kind of crusade?’ (Fisk 1997), first published as a magazine article in a section of the UK *Sunday Independent*. The events told at the start of the article – the bombing of a Lebanese ambulance full of women and children, by Israeli air attack, using American-made Apache helicopters and ‘Hellfire’ missiles (discovered later by Fisk to have been manufactured originally by Lockheed, since bought by Boeing), killing most of the people in the vehicle and in a nearby house – *have* to be rendered in third person perspective because Fisk was not present, and was told of the event by another journalist. Despite the ‘third person’ perspective, and the ‘seeing’ of the ‘implied author’ being at two removes from the action, a sense of closeness with characters is carefully constructed by very specific status details: not only the ages and names of the people who the readers know are about to be killed, but precise details of what they are doing: Two women ‘spent the night ... cowering in the barn close to the village donkeys and cows’ while ‘a farmer who acted as volunteer ambulance driver for the ... village, had spent the night with [his wife and three small daughters] in the family’s one-room hut above an olive grove, listening to the threats broadcast by the Voice of Hope radio station’. In this way, the reader actually ‘sees’ (and ‘hears’) what those characters are experiencing, including the ‘towering clouds of black and grey smoke [that] drifted towards the Mediterranean as thousands of Israeli shells poured into the little hill villages’.

The centre of focalisation changes in the second paragraph of the fifth page, when the implied author has to represent himself explicitly, using the first person perspective,

as the story moves on from the explicit representation of the tragedy to Fisk's personal investigation of it, including his account of interviewing employees of Boeing and Lockheed. The first-person perspective would not have been appropriate for the first five pages where Fisk gives details of events that he himself did not witness first hand. This article is especially useful to demonstrate to students the strong link between Wolfe's notions of status details and point of view, and also how to change focalisation in a way that is congruent with the subject matter.

A first person feature written by one of our students in 2011 and published in the youth magazine *Voiceworks* uses the first-person narrative perspective to tell the story of the writer's work in community radio. If written as a standard news story rather than as a magazine feature, one can imagine this being a rather static if worthy piece of writing, but the first person perspective allows the writer to create a lively forward movement, a characteristic integral to compelling narrative. The writing is replete also with Wolfe's 'status details', and that other essential – dialogue:

It is 3.32pm on a sunny Saturday afternoon.

I dump my university books in one corner of the Student Youth Network's (SYN) radio studios and settle myself on a swivel chair right in front of the console. I eagerly put on the headphones, gently fade out the current song and turn on the microphones.

'Welcome in to Hot Pot!' I say cheerily.

'And Hot Pot is your weekly show on SYN about Asian lifestyles and current affairs,' adds Mike Houghton, my radio co-host. 'Today, we are talking about ...'

Tune in to community radio today and there's every chance you'll come across an Asian program (Kwong 2012).

An important aspect of narrative feature writing exemplified in this piece is the interspersing of dialogue with essential information, the technical term for which is 'comment mode' (Lee 2011). This mode tends to arrest the forward movement of the story, whereas dialogue and depictions of action propel the story forward. So the information (comment mode) needs to be interspersed sparingly, as has been done in the second half, or else embedded in the action, as in the second paragraph.

This encourages students to think about the construction of their own feature articles, which they start by the fifth week of the semester. We tell them they are going to need to use the comment mode some of the time. But of course this mode breaks up the mimesis, the showing, as it constructs a position for the reader that is some distance from the story. So we ask students to think very carefully about where they want to put their comment writing, as it would be a rare successful feature if it could do without any. This is an important element of feature writing that operates in synergy with the concepts from the field of narratology discussed earlier – focal characters, shifting focalisation, and the construction of 'close' perspectives – which many students find quite challenging. To restate these concepts in the clearest possible way, we ask the students the following question:

Where there is "telling" (that is, the comment mode), your readers are going to feel more like passive listeners; where there is "showing" (that is, dialogue or action), they

are going to feel closer to the characters, ideally even identify with them, and see things through their eyes. Which do you think they prefer?

We only have to ask this question once.

With so much competition for readers' attention now, first-person features are perhaps preferred for this very reason; that is, readers are more likely to be interpolated into the story as the actors. Each year, as we look for published examples to show our students, we find the percentage of first person features growing, in relation to third person.⁷ Nevertheless, third person features still exist, and it is salient to examine how they create the close contact with the reader, something which the first person narratives can achieve more easily. One third-person feature, about a particular Melbourne photographer, will serve as an example. The topic is tattooing. The feature claims it is describing a new trend, and depicts it in vivid and engaging writing. Published in one of the magazine sections of the *Melbourne Age*, it is clearly targeted to a local audience, playing on the exceptionalism and self-proclaimed 'trendiness' of Melbourne. The opening paragraph gives an indication of many salient aspects of the writing:

In Melbourne shopping strips, tattoo studios have become as ubiquitous as fish-and-chip shops. Not so long ago, seeing someone with a tatt was something of a rarity, but nowadays it seems that Melbourne, from its footy stars to punk guitarists to the waiter handing you your morning latte, is awash in ink.

Photographer Nicole Reed has been snapping portraits of tattooed folk and tattoo artists for Melbourne-based magazine *Tattoos Down Under* for years. She sports 31 'one-point' tattoos (small designs) and a full sleeve (an arm of different tattoos that look like one). She reckons Melbourne's particularly artistic bent has plenty to do with its colourful skins (D'Arcy 2012).

The writer has constructed a very strong sense of herself, the implied author, through showing us very specifically what she is seeing: the tattoo studios and fish-and-chip shops on shopping streets, the footy stars and guitarists – the latter two most probably seen by her in the media, but nevertheless part of her world. Her morning latte is also part of this world and firmly constructs her as the centre of focalisation in the story. We also note that what she describes herself as seeing are in fact examples of Wolfe's status symbols, bolded in the excerpt above. Such symbols continue as she presents her first interviewee, with her 'full sleeve' of tattoos, so that when this interviewee speaks, readers 'look' at her (helped by the picture to the right) through the focaliser's eyes. The second interviewee is rendered somewhat more prosaically, virtually in comment mode, which does not impede the flow, given the vividness of the earlier details and the interspersing of direct dialogue, automatically more vivid than straight prose, as this example testifies:

I was 19 and in Paris ... I walked past this tattoo parlour, and had this concept of a key and a heart, and then bang! Bang! I look back and think, yes, probably not the best thing to have your hands tattooed at 19 years old, but it's never held me back.

The breathless tone and unedited nature of the dialogue heightens its colourful and dramatic quality, drawing the reader in to 'see' this person. The article as a whole is a

good example of an effective blend of telling and showing, fusing the role of observer and participant (Ricketson 2004: 233).

Ethical considerations

While the literary techniques of narrative journalism are crucial elements employed by the writer to construct a gripping narrative, equally important is the reader's trust that what is written is 'true'. We examine the implication of narrative techniques on ethics, reminding students, as Ricketson does, that features need to be constructed from 'documentable subject matter chosen from the real world' (2004: 235); and although fictional techniques are being used, what students are writing about must be real. Using Ricketson's analogy of the iceberg, with the polished prose as the tip, students are reminded 'that literary journalism stands or falls on the quality of the reporting and research work. Without that, all the fine prose in the world has little meaning' (2001: 157).

Underpinning our inclusion of ethics in this subject are the debates about the media performing a 'watch-dog' role, explored by Hirst and Patching (2007), which is part of the students' set reading in the course. This reading informs an analysis of the various checks and balances that impact upon journalists as discussed by ethical media theorists such as Denis Muller in the edited book *Australian journalism today* (2012). Muller's practical discussion of the rules and conventions of journalism provides valuable insight into the conventions of 'on the record', 'off the record' and 'background' (Ricketson 2012: 46). Controversies surrounding media ethics – such as the phone hacking scandal in the UK, Wikileaks and the recent Independent Media Inquiry – are discussed in the ethics lecture, along with the MEAA Code of Ethics for journalists.

It is in weeks seven, eight and nine (so one quarter of the whole course), when students are workshopping their feature articles, that the impacts of literary techniques on ethics are explored in detail. We have found students can struggle with the notion of being able to use literary techniques in the process of writing 'true stories'. The students must conduct their own interviews and provide contact details and while many find this very challenging it serves the clear purpose of teaching initiative, accuracy and integrity in reporting. It also hones their powers of observation as they endeavour to create for the reader an engaging narrative that evokes a sense of who they are interviewing and why the reader should care about their story. Issues such as allowing the interviewee to read a finished draft are raised as is whether or not they should 'clean up' quotes. As Gutkind says, 'the concept and conflicts of truth and literary licence require continuous clarification and careful analysis' (1997: 120) and we note, as Maras does, that 'objectivity' has never appeared in any Australian journalism code; rather the emphasis is on 'accuracy, fairness and disclosure of all essential facts' (2013: 16).

In workshopping, the students learn from their own writing and the work of others how narrative technique can enhance or obscure the story being told. In one instance, a student asked her classmate if she had carried out any of the interviews in what

looked like an impressive article on the wrongful imprisonment and death of a Chinese man. She had not, instead lifting slabs of texts from Chinese newspapers and online media. Importantly, based upon previous discussions and lectures, the class were also able to suggest alternative story ideas for the student that involved direct interviews on locally relevant issues. The students became a valuable source of information for each other, generously sharing their contacts with classmates. Ethical considerations also arose in telling the personal stories of friends and family. Topics such as sexual abuse within the church required great sensitivity and care and the ethics of giving a right of reply. It was a practical lesson of the MEAA journalists' code of ethics that 'Accountability engenders trust' and that 'Without trust, journalists do not fulfil their public responsibilities'.

Throughout the course we discuss the central issue of the emergence of the 'citizen journalist', which raises the question of just who are entitled to call themselves journalists. Theorists such as Cooper speak of the Internet as the 'Fifth Estate' (2009) while Dutton goes as far as to declare the Fifth Estate to be any 'networked individual' (2009: 2). In an age of texting, facebooking and tweeting, a reminder that defamation laws apply online, as well as in print, serves to reinforce for those writing in all forms of journalism, including magazine articles, that ethics must inform every aspect of the process, from research to final draft. Just as ethics are a constant, so too are the tenets of good writing and journalistic skills. And we argue that in this totally mediated, fast-moving, globalized world, with extremely converged, proliferating, interactive media forms, one of the best tools we can equip our students with is the ability to act ethically while using literary techniques that allow their readers to 'shift into the eye-sockets of people in the story'.

Endnotes

1. As we were completing the final editing of this article, we received an email advertising a new book by Rosalind Coward, entitled *Speaking personally: The rise of subjective and confessional journalism*, published November 2013 by Palgrave Macmillan.

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