Narrative is dead! Long live Narrative!

A long-form narrative essay arguing against the idea that the Web is the enemy of long-form narrative and proposing alternative theories about the forms and uses of narrative and non-narrative information.

By Dan Conover

So I was sitting in a downtown Charleston coffee shop with Ken Hawkins last week when in walked Sally and Gary Smith. For those of you who don't know them, Ken is the guy behind TheDigitel, which just made news by announcing some new investment and out-of-town expansion plans, and Gary is the celebrated Sports Illustrated writer who on Thursday became the Washington Post's poster child for long-form narrative.

It struck me as symbolic.

On the one hand, there's Ken and his product, relentlessly chewing through newsfeeds and Twitterstreams and hashtags looking for anything of relevance and interest to local readers, summarizing and linking and enhancing it, and then grinding on. TheDigitel is as good a local news aggregator site as you'll find, but it's a restless, twitchy beast that cycles through more content than it can display, each item neatly summarized and updated in chunks that rarely exceed 300 words before being blown off the front by the next one.

On the other, Gary. He earns a sweet living south of Calhoun Street producing four beautifully written magazine stories a year.

I exist somewhere in the middle. I went into to journalism because I was a storyteller, and reporting gave me a chance to write every day and get paid for it. After more than a decade of editing, I went back to reporting as a feature writer, threw myself into trying to learn long-form, and won the highest award that was available to me. It proved the high-water mark of my interest in producing traditional narrative journalism.

That was 2005, the year Web 2.0 began its multimedia viral expansion, and when I saw the digital revolution going that-a-way, I followed along to record it. By the time I returned to the features department in February 2007, I was producing what was probably the first and only attempt to create a weekly features section without narrative. Every Friday I took a feature topic and broke it into five short "items" that could be arranged in any order. No story ever jumped. I gave myself a credit at the bottom of the page, but no bylines.

Since then, as the mass media industry continued to collapse in flames and confusion, I've found myself thinking and writing about narrative and information repeatedly.

What people struggle to understand is this: I am, by nature, a storyteller, not a programmer. I love writing so much I do it without being paid. And so when I tell you that the next step in the evolution of journalism is non-narrative, it's not as someone who hates narrative, but as its ardent suitor.

Sonnets & thumbsuckers

I found myself making this case Wednesday night in a Facebook chat with one of my former reporters, who now teaches journalism at an SEC university. The faculty there is struggling to come up with a meaningful core curriculum, and she was taken aback when another instructor challenged the assertion that teaching good writing is a fundamental function of a journalism education.

I love good writing, but I found myself arguing the non-narrative case. "What *form* of good writing?" I asked her. "A sonnet is a form of writing that can be done well or poorly, but journalists don't stress quality sonnet writing because we deem it irrelevant."

My point? Journalism schools have taught view-from-nowhere, AP Style-compliant, mass-media-voice long-form feature writing for decades, and readers just aren't interested. Educating another generation of students to file 75-inch profiles of local United Way executives, written for the annual press contest judges who determine next-year's promotions, just isn't much of an answer to the market-side questions that demand our attention.

Ultimately we concurred that there would always be a place for excellent long-form writing (congratulations, Gary), but concluded that the era of the mediocre middle had ended. Then we said goodnight, and I slipped back into my concurrent Facebook chat with technology entrepreneur Abe Abreu Sr. of e-Me Ventures. Beginning on Monday, I'll be working with Abe on a project that -- among other things -- hopes to give newspaper publishers an elegantly useful tool that extracts data from natural language articles.

Again with that crazy ironic juxtaposition thing...

The problem with narrative

My 21st century journalism education began in 2004 on NYU Professor Jay Rosen's *PressThink* blog, where

every article of faith in my traditional journalism canon was challenged. I already understood that stories are the way people make sense of their lives, but it was during 2004-05 that I began to see how journalistic narrative was distorting the way we viewed the world.

Classic narrative follows a subject through a conflict to a resolution. And if our primary means of understanding something as complex as global warming is just a series of narratives about conflict, then we're not going to make much progress. This is one reason why American mainstream news organizations kept emphasizing critics of global warming, even though the most credible peer-reviewed studies favored the anthropogenic warming theory championed by Al Gore.

It opened my eyes. We didn't need *better* narrative journalism about global warming, we needed *less of it*. We needed a way of communicating that encouraged the evaluation of facts instead of the balancing of rhetoric. It's a shift that requires a radically different theory of the press.

You can follow that thread through the rest of my newspaper career in various ways, but in the end I simply left the business and began writing about alternatives, unfettered by the complications of disapproving bosses.

At any rate, in one of those long-form pieces about the future of media I imagined a new way of making money off original reporting. Instead of coding up narratives with tags after the fact, reporters and editors could begin capturing structured and semi-structured data as part of their usual workflows. This idea of compiling and selling data products didn't get as much attention as my "rant" about paywalls, yet you never know what happens to the seeds you plant.

Fast forward to Saturday, at BarCamp Charleston, where writer/programmer/podcaster/futurist Dave Slusher told me that my "informatics model" had changed his thinking about news.

"You know, when someone's kid has just been killed, I don't want to know how they *feel*," he said. "I *know* how they feel. They feel *terrible*. That's a question that should never be asked. What I want to know is, how did it happen, why did it happen, and what we can do to prevent it from happening again."

His thinking, like mine, suggests that the best way to get at that last issue -- the speculative, corrective question -- is by taking the data out of the narrative story of a child's death and storing it in a structure that makes it easy for users (or, potentially, clients) to spot patterns.

Mining information from narrative archives is expensive, inefficient and shockingly incomplete. But if reported information were stored in a structure rather than just woven into routine narratives, we'd have a lot more knowledge about the world around us.

Hence my interest in acronyms like XML (extensible markup language) and RDF (resource descriptive framework). It's not that they represent a romantic ideal, it's that they represent a civic good.

But isn't *this* a long-form essay?

How observant of you, dear reader. Yes it is, and there are several reasons why.

First, it's a form I still enjoy. Second, it's the native language for the audience I hope to reach: people in the news business who are still open to change. And finally, if handled competently and employed for the right topic, it can be extremely effective.

This is a persuasive essay in which I'm trying to convince you to stop looking at narrative through the nostalgic, recriminating lens deployed by The Washington Post's Joel Achenbach. Yes, on Page 3 of his tale there's an attempt to balance things out a bit, but the story he's telling is about the noble long-form writer/sage, confronted by the shallow "i-hate-everything" trolls of the Web, fighting the good fight and prevailing. Now *that's* narrative!

It's also not true. More people are writing and publishing now than ever before, and most of it is narrative. Most of it is also low-grade, cheaply produced, overly personal and not of general interest, but frankly the same thing can be said about most of the metro columnists and editorial hacks still grinding out a living at America's flagship dailies.

Will there always be a place for quality long-form narrative? That's the resolution of Achenbach's story, but let me ask you: *Did you ever really doubt that this is what he'd conclude?* Narrative isn't under assault. The economic hegemony of mass media is, and with it go the fortunes of journalists who made a living via an advertising subsidy that just disappeared.

My description of what's changing is something that Achenbach says himself, and he says it quite well:

> *Storytellers will have to be more disciplined or get a new line of work. This is not a crisis, this is progress. Fewer "jello ledes," quote-dumps, the whole notebook disgorged upon the page. Less overwriting by frustrated novelists. Sorry, we don't need to read Proust's version of the zoning hearing.*

I'd give him points for this, but it's like acknowledging that proper spelling is good. My professors told me exactly this during my first year of J-school in 1988, and it's been reinforced by every boss I ever had. Yet nothing changes. *Why*?

Well, because getting to that new, efficient, honest, clearly communicated standard requires that senior journalists get serious about inventing alternatives to narrative, and after 20 years of talking about it, they're no closer than when I was a rookie.

The truth is they're *never* going to get there on their own. and so journalism will continue to reward the narrative writers and punish the innovators. It's just all they know, and they're damn near maudlin about it.

For those keeping score at home...

The current mainstream assumption is that we have to dumb-down journalism to survive in the digital era. Dave Kindred seems to have reached that conclusion and accepted it in a column that made me want to reach through the screen and shake him. The answer isn't dumbing down, and Baseball Hall of Fame sportswriters ought to be the first people to understand this.

Did the invention of the box score ruin sportswriting? No? *Why not?*

Could it be that human beings process different types of information in different ways, with different needs at different times?

Hey all you baseball guys: Where would you be with your Saberetrics and your arcane statistics if there hadn't been standardized, structured, non-narrative box scoring lo those many decades ago? If every statistician had to derive every insight by reading every baseball game story without the benefit of those box scores, how good would your stats be?

Not to put too fine a point on it, but without box scoring, *how many at-bats would never have been recorded for future historians because they didn't fit into the narrative the writer picked as he hammered out a story on deadline?*

Do you get it now? Today's revolution isn't about killing narrative, but about inventing box scores for actions that don't take place in ballparks.

TLDNR *(Too long, did not read)*

So what does the future hold? Let me conclude by answering that with a story

A friend of mine once told me that he thought I made good points in my blog posts, but that they were just too damned long. "You need an editor," he said (no argument here). And maybe a year later we were chatting and I mentioned I was reading Neil Stephenson's Baroque Cycle. His response? "Oh, that's a great series! And I love *Cryptonomicon*, too!"

To recap: A 3,000-word essay on a blog? *Too long.* A three-volume series, with each of those volumes so long that the publisher later broke them up into eight books, based on the intertwined, rollicking, meandering, elaborate, expository, *BAROQUE* stories of an army of exquisitely drawn characters? *Great!*

And it is great. It's also a great example of my point: The more efficient, short-form information we consume, the more we'll long for the pleasures of a good story, nicely presented. That's my bet as a novelist, anyway.

We need to make these distinctions so that we can have more productive conversations about what we do and how we're going to do it in the future. I hope after reading this you'll agree.

Thank you,

Dan

Notes

This essay was first posted on my blog, XARK, on Friday, Oct. 30th.

You won't know it from reading this PDF version, but the original HTML document contains multiple links to relevant and/or supporting information.

Because the strength of the Web isn't the strength of print, I've edited this document for this PDF presentation. For instance, in the Web version, my first reference to Achenbach doesn't identify him as being from The Washington Post, because a hyperlink does that job for me. And so on.

I also fixed some typos. They happin, you know.