

Some Parting Thoughts from Our Former President . . .

What Will the Future Bring?

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What does the future hold for literary journalism studies? Literary journalism has become part of the tradition in the spreading of the concept of newsworthiness. Thus it is part of a longer-lasting evolution toward the reduction of information-gaps and knowledge-gaps among the citizens of our world. The question that arises is how does the International Society for Literary Journalism Studies and *Literary Journalism Studies* contribute to literary journalism reaching all corners of the world? And given that literary journalism has been characterized as “slow journalism,” is it compatible with instant release of text, image, and sound, along with the growing empowerment of the reception end and with an overflow of messages?

Consider the lessons from history and how our concept of literacy has shifted and changed over time: The Roman Senate and later emperors had relevant news and events of various kinds painted on stone or metal and displayed them in public places. Thus they created the *acta*. The nature of such early public documents, like the *acta*, or a king’s proclamation during the medieval period, was a powerful one, in terms of sender, and the message was to be taken at its word, as it conveyed an official version of facts and anticipated the expected reaction by recipients. Years ago, defenders of the magic bullet theory could have successfully verified it here: because reception outcomes were mandated and no variations in reaction were acceptable because all deviance would be punished. That, of course, does not mean that there were not secret misgivings on the part of receivers who could think for themselves, and therein lies a submerged and unofficial reception theory.

Later, the advent of the printing press allowed efficient and far-reaching publication of news. We know what happened: By the nineteenth century we see the rise of the mass press after three centuries of technical growth, literacy rise, and availability/ability to acquire periodicals. Authors and journalists

were well aware of the fact that they were writing for an audience that was eager and growing: eager to read newspapers and thus get information or entertainment.

This access did not, however, permeate all layers of society equally. A variety of studies focusing on the more recent twentieth century (e.g. Tichenor, Donohue, and Olien, 1970¹; Genova and Greenberg (1979)²; Werthein (2000)³; Griswold, McDonnell, and Wright (2005)⁴; Jennifer Jerit (2009)⁵; Stolle and Gidengil (2010)⁶) have examined this knowledge gap. We know that different people access different information, depending on factors such as income, education, gender, social status, and so on. The result is that due not only to technological changes, but also to individual adaptation to new media environments as well, even the very notion of literacy has shifted. ⁷ Henry Jenkins (2009) views new literacies as a relevant component of participatory culture. These types of literacy involve more than individual skills; in fact they entail social skills such as collaboration and networking.⁸ Previous reading cultures involved some social skills, especially those that were necessary for public debate about text and context. In addition to this, our current reading culture involves more than the traditional dual relationships between individual reading and the written piece itself, or the triangle between reader/criticism/work, or even the additional element of the industrial relation that involved the production of the written platform that supported the text. Literacy is now a demanding but also more rewarding quality/social skill that presupposes an active role on the part of the recipient.

Such a brief survey of media history and criticism gives rise then to the fundamental question of how the IALJS and its journal as loci for research and development fit into this unequal panorama that enables information and contents to reach all corners of the world, provided their audiences are able and willing to consume it. In view of such a panorama, literary journalism (as, for that matter, most written production) faces challenges that must be carefully analyzed. Mahmoud Eid and Stephen Ward in an editorial to a special issue of the *Global Media Journal*, entitled “Ethics, new media, and social networks” point to the interaction between new media, technology, and the public.⁹ Relevant to this purpose is to inquire into the results of this involvement of technology in the future survival of a type of journalism that has been characterized as ‘slow journalism’, or ‘news that lasts’. Again, can it survive?

Here, methodological tools are paramount. Quantitatively and qualitatively, we know for a fact that literary journalism became more immensely widespread in numbers and variety in different countries throughout the twentieth century, as authors such as John C. Hartsock (2000)¹⁰, Norman

Sims (2007)¹¹, Sonja Zdvoc (2008)¹², Isabel Soares (2009)¹³, Richard Keeble (2007, 2012)¹⁴¹⁵ and Bill Reynolds (2009)¹⁶ among many others, have demonstrated in their work on the international variations of this type of journalism. But what the future holds for the association and its journal in the twenty-first century is another question, and one that is not easy to answer.

One approach in the effort to divine that future is to adopt a business method of analysis, i.e., the SWOT model that examines Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. Often used for similar purposes but in different contexts, the model addresses two types of issues, internal and external. Internal issues affect an organization and its goals: These are the strengths and weaknesses that need analysis. On the other hand, the external issues that affect an organization and its goals are opportunities and threats. Let us tackle each one individually.

Starting with Strengths: IALJS displays a very strong focus, apparent in its yearly conferences. We have a journal, *Literary Journalism Studies*, published twice a year, and a quarterly newsletter of very high standards. Both publications are freely available online. The membership is composed of some of the most internationally relevant names in the academic field of literary journalism, stemming from a variety of geographic origins. This diversity is likewise portrayed in IALJS officers, all of them highly committed to their various roles and tasks. Due to careful planning and sound economic principles, the financial situation is stable and prospering slowly but steadily. There is a strong and relatively small inner circle in the organization, leading to close cooperation among founding and new members. Moreover, this atmosphere of cohesion and cooperation displays to all newcomers an image of a strong organization based upon trust, respect, openness, and merit. Indeed, these have become our trademarks.

The other internal aspect that needs to be addressed in such analysis is Weaknesses, and there we may find an obvious one, related to our implantation, rather feeble in Asia, and even worse in Africa. Another of the weaknesses is a relatively small membership which, however, can also be a strength because it makes for a more cohesive body. A minus factor, and one that may be closely related to the shift referred to above in platforms for publication, is the high age average of members. Literary journalism appeals strongly to people acculturated in a reading society, willing to spend hours devoted to such a task: Many younger people have been acculturated to a screen culture, with flashes of information quickly being displayed and replaced by others.

In terms of external Opportunities, driven by internal weaknesses, there is still the opportunity to grow, geographically speaking, as scholars and students from Asian and African countries have not yet joined the Association

in large numbers. As a recent and growing association, there are still ample possibilities for growth, and IALJS's ability to absorb new members has been established and will work to its advantage, as this field of studies may be expanded to locations where it may already exist as a publishing practice, but without an international intellectual home to refer to.

Finally, let us consider external Threats: There are those imposed upon all journalism plus the scarcity of platforms for release of literary journalism pieces, eventually leading to a dwindling number of new publications and, therefore, less of a new corpus of work. Pace and sheer volume of news flowing around the world on platforms such as the Internet usually entail very short attention spans for written pieces, and books are being replaced by other platforms such as e or audio books that may be quite useful in some circumstances, but can be platforms that also provide many distractions for the message recipient. We live in a visual culture and if our attention is not focused on printed and electronic writing, but visual graphics, our mental focus may easily stray. Finally, another threat for the time being may be the lack of renewal of membership, one that has not been felt much so far, with a steady growth of members, but which is always a possibility.

To conclude, I noted earlier that the Roman *acta* had a fixed purpose centuries ago, at a time when social behavior was highly regulated and transgression was officially and publicly unacceptable. But the emergence of a literary journalism and an earlier proto-literary journalism, along with other discourses, allowed many readers to handle a growingly complex media reality, one that could still be subject to social regulation but that allowed for wider acceptance of diversity and interpretation. Now, our age of screens displays Mashall McLuhan's principle that the medium is the message and the graphics of the screen have come to dominate. Whether its fleeting visual messages will remain central in the process of mass mediation, and will not collapse into a centripetal movement, is yet to be seen. But if we consider the issues these circumstances raise, IALJS and *Literary Journalism Studies* should hopefully be in a strong position to thrive in the future.

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NOTES

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