

# The Rise of Narrative Journalism in the Newsroom

*Rewriting the Newspaper: The Storytelling Movement in American Print Journalism* by Thomas R. Schmidt. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2019. Appendix. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Hardcover, 180 pages, USD\$35.

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In his new book, *Rewriting the Newspaper: The Storytelling Movement in American Print Journalism*, Thomas Schmidt provides a detailed account of the rise of narrative journalism in newspapers in the last half of the twentieth century. In doing so, he offers an invaluable record of the men and women who pioneered storytelling as a cultural and institutional movement in the newspaper industry, situated within historical contexts that simultaneously shaped and resisted narrative innovation in the industry.

After an introduction in which he provides a brief overview of the book and establishes the theoretical lens of his research—a synthesis of institutionalism and cultural analysis that he refers to as “cultural institutionalism” (101–18)—Schmidt begins with a deep dive into the *Washington Post’s* innovative transformation of the “For and about Women” section into the Style section, beginning in 1968. Under the leadership of iconic editor Ben Bradlee, the section shifted from what had been home for gendered coverage of “women’s interests” into a holistic lifestyle section that responded to and reflected the changing social mores of the late 1960s. Central to all of this, Schmidt shows, was the adoption and adaptation of narrative to the professional culture of the *Post*. In an era when the media landscape, too, was being transformed by factors such as the dominance of television and migrating audiences, the *Post* was the first to break with institutional tradition and experiment with narrative structures and storytelling techniques, which had captured cultural cachet in the New Journalism movement and many popular magazines of the day.

This transformation was not, however, without its detractors. From readers, to reporters, editors, and even then-publisher Katharine Graham, many people in and outside the newsroom resisted the new editorial style with expressed feelings ranging from apprehension to abhorrence. Through robust examples of archival research (e.g., letters to the editor), Schmidt notes that it was not that these people categorically objected to the use of storytelling in journalism, but that they did not expect to see it in the *newspaper*. “They would probably not have been so surprised had this been a magazine



story or a fictional narrative. Apparently, their expectations of *what* a newspaper should report, and *how* it should report, were upset” (37). In spite of this resistance, Schmidt shows, the wager on the new Style section paid off for the *Post*. Moreover, Schmidt situates the influence of Style into the broader institutional context of journalism history in noting that it was largely due to Bradlee’s insistence that in 1977 the advisory board for the Pulitzer Prizes voted to create a new category for Feature Writing.

In Chapter 3, Schmidt broadens his study to the broader adoption of narrative journalism in newspapers across the United States. Specifically, he notes the pivotal role played by Eugene C. Patterson, who had formerly worked as managing editor at the *Post* under Bradlee, and his hiring of Roy Peter Clark as a full-time writing coach for the *St. Petersburg Times*. This decision, and Patterson’s overarching effort to make the *Times* a “test case for demonstrating what improved writing in a newspaper could look like” (51), would prove to serve as a model for the narrative movement in newspapers across the country in the years to come. Clark’s goal, writes Schmidt, “was to teach a critical vocabulary so that reporters and editors would have a shared understanding about how to construct good stories, both as reports and narratives” (54). Through a variety of initiatives, Clark emphasized that narrative, when appropriate for the subject matter, could enhance both the informational content and the reader’s experience of a story. But it required not only a different approach to writing, but also how journalists collected their information. Telling a story that readers found both richly informative and deeply engaging required writers to approach their reporting with an eye for detail and a feel for the humanizing elements of the people involved. It required that these journalists seek not just the facts but also their importance. Schmidt notes that Clark’s arrival was initially met with skepticism in the newsroom; however, in time, reporters at the *St. Petersburg Times* would come to describe their experiences with him as “the most important thing that’s ever happened to me in my four years as a pro” and one that “raised the consciousness of the staff to good writing” (57).

In 1978 Patterson became president of the American Society of News Editors (ASNE). After the association’s conference that year, more than 1,500 copies of a special report written by Clark were sent through the association’s secretary to editors and reporters around the country. ASNE also began that same year to organize annual awards contests for the best examples of newspaper writing. While many publishers and editors saw narrative newswriting as a practical way of combatting readership decline, advocates like Patterson and Clark championed the idea that it was more than mere attractive marketing; good storytelling about substantive news topics, in Clark’s words, “has important political implications for a democracy” (61). At the same time, Schmidt notes that the narrative movement in newspapers had its critics and internal challenges, the most visible being the Janet Cooke scandal and her fabricated story of “Jimmy’s World,” published in 1980 in the *Post*. While such journalistic iniquities and other abuses of narrative journalism’s stylistic affordances undoubtedly stained the movement’s reputation, it also provided an opportunity for its practitioners and proponents to honestly and carefully consider their ethical obligations and the limitations of journalistic storytelling.

In Chapter 4, Schmidt follows the history of the storytelling movement as it progressed into the mainstream in the 1980s and 1990s. Along with a case study of the (Portland) *Oregonian* in the early 1990s—another success story for the movement—Schmidt chronicles the rise of narrative journalism conferences, professional trainings, and academic programs outside the newsroom. In 1991 the National Writers Workshops began in Wilmington, Delaware. Shortly thereafter, the Poynter Institute began organizing local writing weekends. In 2001, Harvard University held the Nieman Conference on Narrative Writing, a milestone in marking the credibility of the craft. Likewise, top journalism schools at the University of Missouri, the University of Oregon, and Boston University also began developing sustained programs focused on training current and future journalists in the art of storytelling. Textbooks and anthologies dedicated to narrative news writing were published and sold. Newsletters on narrative from organizations like Poynter grew in circulation to professionals across the country, and the storytelling movement was legitimized through articles in publications like *Columbia Journalism Review* and *American Journalism Review*.

In the midst of this blossoming literary press movement, Schmidt notes, newspapers also began targeting more affluent niche audiences. While Schmidt acknowledges that industry pressures certainly played a role in shaping the storytelling movement in newspapers, he argues that critics who suggest such macro-level influences were the only compelling factors in driving the adoption of narrative techniques in newspapers fail to acknowledge the importance of individual journalists during this time. While it is true that declining readership, the rise of television, and the changing tastes of the U.S. public forced newspaper owners and executives to reconsider how they viewed their product, it is also true that reporters and editors were shaping the topography of narrative in ways that defied traditional hard/soft, serious/fluff, news/features dichotomies.

As noted earlier, Schmidt has provided the field of literary journalism studies with an invaluable historical account of the narrative movement in newspapers over the last half of the twentieth century. Moreover, he has situated this account in a rich and useful theoretical framework of “cultural institutionalism” (10–11) that reconciles the macro-, meso-, and micro-level variables that gave rise to the phenomenon. If there is a shortcoming in his analysis, it is that the theoretical considerations could be woven more fluidly throughout the work. Schmidt lays his foundation clearly in the introduction. He also returns to it in the final chapter with a cogent, concise (yet thorough) conclusion that identifies the implications of this “narrative turn” (105–18) with three primary takeaway concepts: 1) narrative journalism as news logic, 2) narrative journalism as a media regime, and 3) narrative journalism as a cultural institution. However, most of the book is dominated by straight historical accounts that comprise the narrative movement, and it is easy to feel disconnected at times from the underlying theoretical framework. This is not to say that the theoretical framework is absent from the discussion; it is *implicit* throughout the text. However, moments of explicit theoretical articulation feel a bit fleeting, leaving the reader to wait until the final chapter to realize the full value of Schmidt’s “cultural

institutionalism” applied to the narrative movement in newspapers.

Schmidt is to be commended in providing both a detailed, robust chronicle of this important era in daily newspapers and a thoughtful, nuanced contribution to theoretical scholarship in the field. It is likely more theory packed throughout the chapters could have risked diminishing Schmidt’s own rich storytelling of narrative journalism’s history in daily newspapers. *Rewriting the Newspaper* is a rigorous work that is academically enlightening and a genuine pleasure to read.