

# IMMERSIVE LONGFORM STORYTELLING

MEDIA | TECHNOLOGY | AUDIENCE

DAVID O. DOWLING

# IMMERSIVE LONGFORM STORYTELLING

A deep dive into the world of online and multimedia longform storytelling, this book charts the renaissance in deep reading, viewing, and listening associated with the literary mind, and the resulting implications of its rise in popularity.

David O. Dowling argues that although developments in media technology have enabled the ascendance of nonfictional storytelling to new heights through new forms, it has done so at the peril of these intensely persuasive designs becoming deployed for commercial and political purposes. He shows how traditional boundaries separating genres and dividing editorial from advertising content have fallen with the rise of media hybridity, drawing attention to how the principle of an independent press can be reformulated for the digital ecosystem.

*Immersive Longform Storytelling* is a compelling examination of storytelling, covering multimedia features, on-demand documentary television, branded digital documentaries, interactive online documentaries, and podcasting. This book's focus on both form and effect makes it a fascinating read for scholars and academics interested in storytelling and the rise of new media.

**David O. Dowling**, Associate Professor in the School of Journalism & Mass Communication at the University of Iowa, is the author of seven books and numerous articles on publishing industries and the culture of media production. His work in digital media and journalism studies has appeared in such journals as *Convergence*, *Genre*, *Digital Journalism*, *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, and *Journalism & Communication Monographs*.

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# **IMMERSIVE LONGFORM STORYTELLING**

Media, Technology, Audience

*David O. Dowling*

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# INTRODUCTION

Typically associated with fiction and gaming, immersive media has recently taken nonfiction by storm, sparking an explosion of absorbing digital journalism. This book examines digital longform journalism broadly conceived across multiple genres, from interactive documentaries such as Google’s “Moon Shot” and “Beyond the Map” to NPR’s famous podcast *Serial*. Behind the emergence of such works are several of the most significant developments in the economics and aesthetics of the digital ecosystem. Ad blockers and the fantasy of ad-free content has elicited the media industry’s corresponding embrace of longer branded content; news media has moved toward longer programming, often delivered in series; and the expanding appetite for increasingly complex narratives as seen in streaming documentary television series has shattered the template of the traditional ninety-minute film, which now extends to thirteen hours or more. Through an examination of the culture and commerce of immersive nonfiction media, this research seeks to answer the larger question of how we now find ourselves in “the golden age of documentary,” as described by Dwayne Bray (2016), executive producer of *League of Denial* (the ESPN documentary responsible for breaking the story of the NFL concussion crisis). That golden age is not just in cable TV, but spans across a rich array of media platforms that has transformed the aesthetic of journalistic narrative.

Immersive longform, as treated in this book, is characterized by both completeness of experience and depth of critical engagement. It runs counter to predictions of the demise of deep reading in a highly distracting digital ecosystem (Carr 2011) seemingly overwhelmed by the manic Twitter-driven news cycle and its attendant superficial online reading practices associated with scanning, skimming, and short attention spans. The stereotype of millennials lacking the capacity for sustained concentration online has been dispelled by

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recent eye-tracking research demonstrating their preference for and satisfaction with digital longform journalism (Marino et al. 2016). A host of studies have corroborated longform’s increasing popularity among an array of audiences, including such younger demographics previously thought to have short attention spans (Newman 2010; Giliberti 2016). Readers now spend more time than ever with news stories designed for mobile devices (Mitchell et al. 2016), absorbed in texts functioning as distraction-free “cognitive containers” (Dowling and Vogan 2015). The media add-ons in such products work to hold reader attention rather than scatter it to external web sources or divide it with display advertising (Dowling 2017).

In the second half of the twentieth century, the New Journalism developed as a hybridization of nonfiction and the novel into absorbing—indeed, page-turning—reportage. Tom Wolfe, Joan Didion, and Hunter S. Thompson drew from novelistic conventions to enthrall readers with their new narrative aesthetic. Journalism now borrows from the grammar of cinema and photography in hybridized online forms such as the multimedia feature, a rapidly evolving genre that began with the *New York Times’* 2012 “Snow Fall: Avalanche at Tunnel Creek.” Literary journalism is no longer limited to the media of the enduring print book, such as Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, or the compelling print feature profile, such as Gay Talese’s “Frank Sinatra Has a Cold.” In its recent digital incarnation, literary journalism operates at the nexus of cinema, radio, and print, spawning newly minted genres capable of immersing mobile audiences in ways previously imaginable only in IMAX theatres.

In the online “marketplace of attention” (Webster 2014), a growing number of companies have invested in attracting audiences through immersive media. Their texts aim not only to “surround users in a visual field of immersion” (Grau 2003: 40), but also signal how they create that illusion, in the process inspiring the critical distance and intellectual absorption associated with deep reading and the literary mind. In these texts, sensory immersion combines with intellectual stimulation in “a context of cultural and linguistic exchanges, referring to the feeling of being enveloped by different social norms and engaged in an intense learning situation.” This challenge-based dimension of immersion refers to a “particularly engrossing state of mind, a concentration of mental resources in the course of a specific activity” (Therrien 2014: 451–452). True crime and probing investigations challenge readers, as in the digital magazine *Atavist’s* “The Mastermind” and award-winning *Love and Ruin*, often confronting them with a moral dilemma of timely cultural significance. Social media portals and autonomous navigation enable online communities to discuss the finer points and perplexing mysteries of these works.

Digital longform has become increasingly self-reflexive by calling attention to the process of its own production. When Sarah Koenig steps out of the traditional reportorial role in *Serial* to confess her hunches, fears, and biases, the curtain is drawn back to expose the journalistic process of production. By

allowing the audience access to the journalist's process, immediacy and depth are achieved, replacing the staid neutrality of traditional news. Viewers similarly access the visceral intensity of the reporting process in *Conflict*, a Webby Award-winning docu-series profiling the lives and work of six conflict photojournalists. The piece delves into the personal and professional consequences of their encounters with humanity's darkest episodes to highlight the complexities—and perils—of this harrowing form of journalism. Longform not only dramatizes the reporting process; new storytelling technologies themselves have joined the cast of characters playing key roles in many stories. The stunning drone footage of the *New York Times'* "Greenland is Melting Away" and the interactive 360-degree shots taken on a motorcycle speeding through Rio de Janeiro in Google's "Beyond the Map," for example, are not merely displays of technological prowess, but drive the narration of their respective scientific and cartographic themes (Dowling 2017).

Such developments bear relevance not only to digital journalism studies, but also media convergence and television industries related to the work of Jenkins et al. (2013, 2016), Havens and Lotz (2016), and Hiippala (2015, 2017), which spans across multiple media fields, including radio broadcasting and podcasting. Immersive media has mainly been the domain of video game studies (Salen and Zimmerman 2003; Torner and White 2012) and film studies (Grodal 2009), but has only begun to be examined in terms of its impact on the narrative aesthetic of nonfictional media products, particularly longform narrative journalism. Subjects of digital longform journalism research by Hernandez and Rue (2016), Jacobson et al. (2016), Giles and Hitch (2018), and my work with Travis Vogan (2015) have focused primarily on multimedia features patterned after the *New York Times'* 2012 Pulitzer Prize-winning "Snow Fall: Avalanche at Tunnel Creek." *Immersive Longform Storytelling* builds on this early research on the multimedia feature by expanding the purview of digital longform journalism to encompass online television, documentary video, content marketing, and podcasting.

## A Large and Versatile Canvas

Free from the limitations of print and early web templates, nonfictional and journalistic narrative has never seen a larger and more versatile canvas than during the current digital revolution. The online world has recently embraced immersive, textured digital media products foregrounding descriptive narrative that emphasizes intimacy and authorial subjectivity. Contrary to allegations that increasing internet use has deprived the culture of narrative, new digital journalism has sparked a renaissance in deep reading and viewing associated with the literary mind. The central argument is that the digital age has raised nonfictional storytelling to new heights, fulfilling its promise as perhaps the most crucial link to our humanity. In the process, traditional boundaries separating genres and dividing editorial from advertising content have fallen

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with the rise of media hybridity. But the ecosystem is not awash with indistinguishable forms. The multimedia feature, on-demand documentary television series, branded digital documentaries, interactive online documentaries, and podcasting have risen to prominence in longform journalism's narrative renaissance.

A series of distinct, yet profoundly convergent, patterns of immersive journalistic media products have surfaced in the digital ecosystem. Pioneering multimedia features constitute one of the newest genres of journalistic narrative. Social media and the online reading revival mark the “remediation” of print according to Marshall McLuhan’s (2001 [1964]) conception of the retrieval of old media features into emergent communication forms (Galloway 2012). The televisual aspect of the hybridized multimedia feature appears in on-demand television and the binge watching revolution. Television’s shift away from the traditional cable model that carried spot advertising has enabled content marketing’s alternative avenue for advertisers to enter the screen. Content marketing has embraced longform journalistic documentary storytelling as a method of promoting lifestyle brands. The rise of podcasting and the interactive documentary online represent two emergent media at the opposite ends of the audio and visual spectrum.

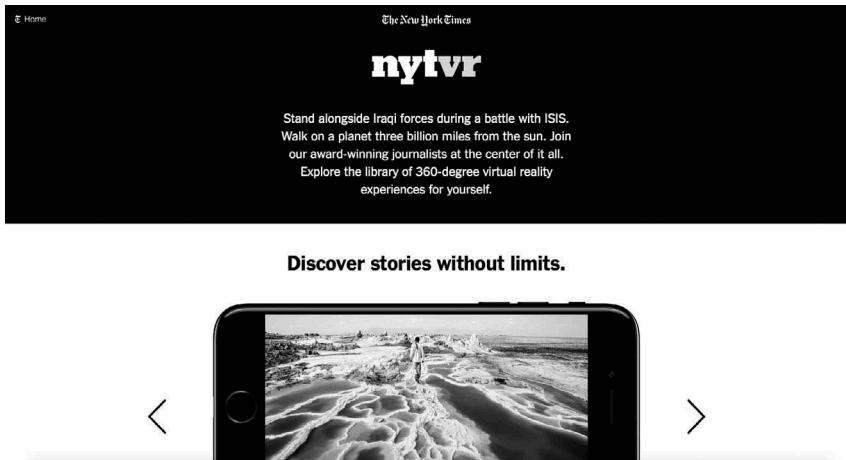
This large digital canvas has inspired nonfiction narratives from Madison Avenue that have reached unprecedented levels of sophistication. Content marketing has unleashed perhaps the widest range of expressive power the advertising industry has seen since the advent of television. The *Columbia Journalism Review* openly worried that the rise of native advertising was tantamount to the wolf at the door of the sacrosanct world of editorial content (Meyer 2014). Yet editorial content was always mediated by promotional discourse, a practice so widespread it even penetrated the work of McLuhan himself. His lucrative speeches commissioned by IBM and General Electric lauded both companies for moving not only electricity, but also information (Pooley 2016). Such trafficking followed McLuhan’s earlier castigation of marketers for the corrosive effects of advertising. After he became a major celebrity himself—famously interviewing with *Playboy* and making a cameo appearance in Woody Allen’s *Annie Hall*—the iconic communication guru sufficiently enriched his dialectic on the tension between culture and commerce to allow that “American ads are a world of festivity and celebration” in his 1970 book *Culture is Our Business*. Pointing to the rhetorical use of the era’s visual and textual repertoire of strategic communication appeals, he noted, “the ad is a meeting place of all the arts and all the skills and all the media of the American environment” (McLuhan 1970: 5), a kind of Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*. In narrative media studies, multimodal design is recognized as “intercompositional intermediality” that manifests itself within a single work, and can include fiction (Wolf 2002: 13; Thon 2016: 13). The migration of nonfictional journalistic and advertising content from print to digital is a process of “crossmediality,” the first step toward its current highly evolved state in embedded multimedia forms (Singer et al. 2011; Thon 2016: 12).

Branded journalism that now circulates free online as multimedia feature stories and documentary videos has drawn on the deep storytelling of longform editorial content. Much of the best journalistic reporting and writing now bears promotional functions. Although easily dismissed as rare or exceptionally glitzy prestige projects designed to showcase their news organizations' technological prowess, these revolutionary narratives have digitally reinvented the feature story, the most engaging of magazine and newspaper genres (Dowling and Vogan 2015). Half of the digital longform pieces produced by the *New York Times'* T Brand Studio drew more unique visitors and engaged them longer than its editorial content (Business Insider 2015). The highest levels of engagement went to stories adhering to a documentary style, such as "Women Inmates," the promotional piece for the Netflix Original *Orange is the New Black*. Its success as one of the *Times'* top articles has encouraged media powerhouses CNN, Conde Nast, and CBS Interactive to launch their own branded journalism production units (Business Insider 2015).

Ad spending on this type of production, which entails serious reporting, writing, editing, and graphic design, was estimated at \$21 billion for 2018, a figure that has quadrupled in the four-year span since 2013 (Business Insider 2015). Since its establishment in 2014, T Brand grew to 108 employees by 2017, a team whose marketing function does not compromise reportorial standards among editors who all share "journalism roots" (Gerth 2017). Fueled by the 2016 acquisition of the Pinterest marketing firm HelloSociety, T Brand's brief yet precipitous rise coincided with the 2016 shuttering of the *Times'* seven-year-old Research and Development Lab. The 2009 origin of the now defunct R&D Lab was a vestige of early internet newspaper industry woes that characterized the 2000s as "an era when 'Will the *New York Times* survive?' was being asked with increasing frequency, and with increasing certainty that it would not" (Riordan 2016). T Brand's rapid expansion that saw the opening of an Asian branch in Hong Kong in 2017 signals the organization's distinct recalibration of digital storytelling innovation toward industrial partnerships, a more profitable developmental business model than its former reliance on its lean R&D Lab to compete in isolation against tech industry giants.

The new partnership model of the *New York Times* now relies on industry for its engine of innovation. Samsung, for example, ran an advertisement during the 2016 MLB World Series touting the VR capacity of its new S8 smartphone. After a brief opening sequence depicting viewers delighting in their immersive experience, the lines "Journalism by the *New York Times*" and "Technology by Samsung" appeared across the screen with both companies' brand logos prominently displayed in tandem to herald their corporate partnership (Figure 0.1) (Samsung 2017). Seeking to gain market share from Apple, the South Korean company offered \$14 million to the *Times* for its production of one VR story per day with its equipment for "The Daily 360" series, later renamed "360 Video" for NYTv (Figure 0.2), ostensibly to avoid association with the print medium's relatively constrained *daily*

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**FIGURE 0.1** Samsung partners with the *New York Times*, *Digiday*, 2017



**FIGURE 0.2** “The Daily 360,” NYTvr, *New York Times*, 2016

newspaper production cycle. The contract represented a windfall for the *Times* of \$35.7 million, a substantial 20% of the company’s total advertising revenue for the last quarter of 2016 (Gerth 2017).

Digital longform and the interactive documentary are now integral parts of the ecosystem of immersive narrative journalism, functioning as promotional texts like many online branded documentary videos, designed to promote a brand or main text. Yet these pieces often bring new content and original narrative material, thus blurring the distinction between main and peripheral media texts, such as trailers and behind-the-scenes and making-of videos. With the advent of digital longform works commissioned by such content marketers as the *New York Times’ T Brand Studio* and the *Wall Street Journal’s WSJ Studios*, readers are immersed in these beautifully crafted and carefully edited multimedia products they vigorously interact with, discuss, and share. These

works are ideally suited for reading and viewing on mobile phones and tablets, devices uniquely capable of capturing the aesthetic power of ekphrasis at the intersection of word and image at the heart of its digital storytelling (Dowling 2017). Advertiser interest in expressing brand values and corporate ethos in broader and deeper messaging than straightforward product promotion traces back to the 1880s and “prestige advertising,” which anticipated the later development of public relations as a field dedicated to strategic communication and publicity. Even at this early stage, brand promotion was leveraging the lexicon of ekphrasis to build credibility and trust by appealing to consumers’ broader lifestyles. This approach “appeared less manipulative than earlier advertising, and succeeded in making the advertising industry more respectable” (Aitken 2013: 153).

The 2010s gave rise to a flurry of technological experimentation with journalistic storytelling. One year after the 2011 launch of Op-Docs, the *Times* unveiled “Snow Fall” as a promotional loss leader designed to bolster digital subscriptions, a bold experiment followed two years later by the formation of T Brand Studio. Originally intended as a short-form video opinion and editorial department, Op-Docs rapidly expanded into immersive documentaries released in seasons (thematically categorized though not serially connected through a coherent narrative) with some segments running up to eighteen minutes in length, as in “Policing Flint” of Season 6. In the spirit of the opinion-editorial page’s core principle of providing a platform for citizen expression, Op-Docs are produced by independent filmmakers, who are granted wide creative latitude for political and artistic expression on topics ranging from current affairs to historical subjects. By contrast, the Samsung-sponsored 360 Video content is produced in-house by *Times* staff journalists. Yet even this divide is beginning to blur, as an increasing number of Op-Docs, particularly longer ones such as “Policing Flint,” now bear the 360 Video logo and Samsung branding, thus bringing content marketing to the editorial page.

## The Perils and Promise of Immersion

McLuhan’s prophetic vision of electronic media engrossing its audiences contained a cautionary warning regarding audience passivity. The medium of “the circuit doesn’t just push things out for inspection,” as he said during a television interview in 1966, it also “pushes you into the circuit.” Since the medium necessarily “involves you,” he warned of the perils of passive consumption of such absorbing media, asking “Why not use the new commercial education as a means to enlighten its intended prey?” and “Why not assist the public to observe consciously the drama which is intended to operate upon it unconsciously?” (McLuhan, as quoted in Pooley 2016). With native advertising running in greater profusion online, the same concern for media literacy holds true today. Yet editorial digital spaces increasingly accommodate paid posts that audiences knowingly engage, the more ethical of which openly disclose their

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industrial partnerships. Branded content and promotional media such as trailers and making-of documentaries have evolved in many cases to the status of primary media text themselves through involving original content and narrative material. Active audience engagement, according to McLuhan, defined “good TV,” which “is the same with ads.” To him, interactivity functioned as a factor of both empowerment and satisfaction, as with today’s digital media. “If the audience can become involved in the actual process of making the ad,” and if it can navigate and explore the virtual self-contained environments autonomously to take part in journalism’s narratives, “then it is happy” (McLuhan 1966).

The digital era bears witness to precisely that process, as readers and consumers of highly spreadable media function as marketers in their own right, stirring interaction in online communities about media products that generate interest and traffic back to the producer’s monetizing site. Audience-produced narratives where “consumers can share their own personal stories about their relationship with the product” crowd Coca-Cola’s website, for example, many of them recounting with warm nostalgia the scene in which they enjoyed their first Coke (Jenkins 2008 [2006]: 70). Even in the early 2000s, Coke executives leveraging participatory culture through sponsorship of *American Idol* recognized that “when a consumer loves you enough to take action, any action, it is time to take notice. Immediately” (Jenkins 2008 [2006]: 73). Participatory culture, as Jenkins et al. (2016, 2013) reminds us, is the cornerstone of networked society and media convergence in which users gain control through not only on-demand viewing and listening, but also by spreading product messaging at an unprecedented rate online via social media. News organizations, from legacy titans such as the *New York Times* to online niche subcultural startups like *Huck*, have joined nonmedia companies like Coca Cola and Purina in reaching out to online communities to spread their brands (Usher 2014). Among the most effective methods of expressing brand values is through immersive nonfiction narrative.

Edifying media, McLuhan (1966) argued, engage the audience in “challenge, discovery, and processing,” drawing them in rather than pacifying them in such a way that neutralizes their political efficacy. To be pushed into the circuit in this manner bears the risk of subjugation to manipulative messaging that McLuhan (1966) called “subliminal advertising” and Madison Avenue’s relentless profit motive to which his colleague Harold Innis alerted him. “Television gave the old circuitry an extra push in the direction of involvement and inwardness,” as McLuhan (1966) observed in the late 1960s of the medium’s capacity to distill and concentrate audience attention. Television’s power to transfix viewers was also a concern of Ray Bradbury, whose novel *Fahrenheit 451* depicts the character of Mildred Montag as a politically anesthetized daytime TV addict. Her political activist husband is alarmed by her parasocial identification with the characters in the programs she watches on “the parlor walls.” In Bradbury’s dystopic vision, one that

anticipates projection TVs and massive screens designed for home theater environments with haunting accuracy, the Montags' government-issued television covers the walls of the living room from ceiling to floor in order to envelop and capture—in the most sinister and subjugating sense of the term—its transfixed yet silenced viewers.

Nonfictional narrative content has recently reclaimed our era's parlor walls and their mobile screen equivalents, now occupying terrain previously dominated by escapist apolitical programming. This movement is not without precedent. Whereas our current renaissance in journalistic longform narrative was spawned by industry—particularly innovations in online news business models for marketing, news branding, and corporate partnerships—it first came to prominence in mass media during the mid-twentieth century through a concerted act of government regulation. In 1962, former FCC Chair Newton Minow denounced television as a “vast wasteland” of programming that squandered the medium’s power to educate and serve the public interest. Minow’s crusade to reform television in 1962 resulted in the expansion of broadcast journalism as a public service, as the fifteen-minute nightly news extended to thirty minutes, and the three major networks aired 400 new documentaries that year (Hilmes 2006).

Now collaboration between news and technology industries, from Samsung to Netflix to Pinterest, rather than government, has revived longform. The genre has returned journalism to its original democratic principles of service to the public interest and advocacy of social justice on behalf of otherwise-invisible populations whose worlds remain distant and abstract in shortform reports and headlines. With some exceptions, editorial agenda-setting has risen to the lofty technological standards of multimedia features. The best tools of multimedia storytelling are increasingly reserved for serious issues of political consequence and learned debate such as immigration (*The Washington Post*'s “A New Age of Walls”), the refugee crisis (*The New York Times'* “The Displaced”), ISIS (“The Fight for Fallujah,” also published by the *Times*), and the prison system (the *Guardian*'s “6X9: A Virtual Experience of Solitary Confinement”). Just as the photojournalism of Lewis Hine in the early twentieth century deployed then-new flash photography to spotlight child poverty as an urgent social crisis demanding immediate intervention in urban centers, drone and 360 film technology enable unprecedented investigative power to access events, lives, and even planets previously unseen.

## Immersive Media’s New Narratives

If one of the main functions of narrative journalism’s podcasts and interactive documentaries is to inspire politicized online discussion, it has done so through its unprecedented powers to immerse the senses in such a way that showcases the subjectivity of both narrator-journalists and their subjects. Digital longform is not known for the staid presentation of emotionally neutral material. The

operative concept of immersion is thus linked to literary journalism's unique visceral intimacy, a bold "escape from the cooler, paler ideas" of objectivist journalism (Hartsock 2016: 30).

Media studies and journalism scholarship combine to form operative definitions of immersive media and narrative used in this research. Concepts related to the language of new media (Manovich 2001), the art and commerce of immersive content (Rose 2011), and visual media's intermediality (Grau 2003) inform the approach to multimodal narrative (Hiippala 2015). The digital ecosystem now provides a richer array of tools than previous generations for deep storytelling that fulfills the promise of the New Journalism, especially as articulated by digital magazine editor Michael Shapiro et al. (2015). "The secret mission" of *The Big Roundtable*, Shapiro's digital-only platform specializing in longform, is "to renew the promise of the New Journalism revolution that started and then sputtered a few decades ago, connecting techniques of great fiction with the discipline and the thrill of serious reporting" (218). To renew the promise of New Journalism online is to recognize specifically that "nonfictional representations represent storyworlds in ways very similar to fictional narrative representations," and that "both fictional and nonfictional narrative representations represent storyworlds using rather similar representational strategies" (Thon 2016: 67–68), a point reinforced as a core tenant of the digital animation of literary journalism (Jacobson et al. 2016: 530, 532).

New Journalism may have seen a rebirth as New New Journalism in the early 2000s with the works of Michael Lewis and Adrian LeBlanc, according to Robert Boynton (2005). But in that pre-smartphone (2007) and pre-tablet (2010) era, narrative journalism's online renaissance was nascent (*Black Hawk Down* by Mark Bowden was a primitive digital prototype) and embryonic at best due to severely limited technological affordances. Multimedia narratives now combine text, photography, and video with graphic animation and interactive data visualization for a more navigable and empowering user experience than the codex, film, or photo album. Since the advent of the tablet, Boynton has highlighted the impact of mobile devices on digital longform production and consumption, an online revival he heralded "The Supreme Nonfiction." The moniker echoes the brazen bravado of Tom Wolfe himself when he proclaimed the death of the novel and its replacement by narrative journalism as the dominant literature of the twentieth century (Boynton 2013: 129). Boynton (2005, 2013), who has been a sharp critic of Wolfe's careerist intentions behind his promotion of the New Journalism, could not resist registering his full-throated support, bordering on ballyhoo, on behalf of this new digital form's stunning potential to revolutionize narrative nonfiction.

Deep storytelling's unprecedeted transmedia sophistication calls for a realignment of critical approaches for understanding the narrative implications of this rapidly evolving new genre of digital longform and its various sub-genres. In particular, "the field of media studies and the subfield of media narratology can

only progress by fully embracing transmedial and transnational perspectives,” as Pearson and Smith (2015: 3) observe. The advent of the photo essay in glossy high-end magazines such as *Life* and *Look* in the mid-twentieth century had its roots in the elaborately illustrated weekly newspapers of the early nineteenth century. Cinema retrieved conventions of live theatre from the previous era, just as television dramas would go to great lengths to pattern programming after live performances complete with canned laughter and applause to simulate the feel of a stage play. Televisual elements now combine with written text in multimedia features in such a way that privileges the prestige of *cinéma vérité*, the most renowned form of documentary film. Television’s most respected shows, beginning with *Hill Street Blues*, have associated themselves with the form through hand-held observational documentary-style production. In such programming, “handheld cameras, awkward pacing, and violation of continuity rules [are used] to make it look more like a documentary film than a traditional sitcom,” a pattern testifying to television’s new affinity for the aesthetic signature of nonfiction narrative (Thompson 2007: 63).

On a parallel trajectory with the ascendance of documentary is the overall sophistication of television storytelling since the 1990s. Shows now demand higher intensity of audience engagement “focused on both diegetic pleasures and formal awareness” associated with the narration of the story rather than its being shown or enacted (Mittell 2015: 53). The key to this complexity is transmediation, both in terms of multimedia production and social media-driven reception, a process by which old distinctions blur. In the case of television, the release of full series for on-demand viewing enables audiences to watch episodes in whatever order and pace they please, just as with the chapters of a novel. Production is now in a state of radical experimentation free from the formal constraints associated with pre-internet media. As Mittell (2015) astutely points out, “what was once a risky innovation device, such as subjective narration, or jumbled chronology, is now almost a cliché” (2–3).

Along with the blurring distinctions between serial and episodic narratives has come a breakdown of the divide between audiences and producers spawned by online social community networks. The on-demand revolution is driven by hybridized production, ever-more-efficient distribution supported by myriad paratexts elaborating the primary text’s story world, and a reception into the hands of vocal users actively sharing, remixing, and creating their own paratexts (Jenkins et al. 2013; Usher 2016). Ephemeral television programming has yielded to preserved, revered, and in some cases canonized texts generating earnest and copious discussion. “The idea that viewers would want to watch—and rerewatch—television series in strict chronology and collectively document their discoveries with a group of strangers was once laughable but is now mainstream” (Mittell 2015: 2–3). Audiences enjoy unprecedented control over their media, which increasingly challenges them with complex narratives posing cognitive demands that require attentional focus and sustained concentration.

## 12 Introduction

Immersion in this sense demands vigorous interaction characterized by active engagement rather than passive escape.

In both television docu-series and other forms, narrative journalism prompts viewers not only to document and discuss their discoveries, but to act upon the world of culture and politics. The public outcry against dolphin slaughter in Japan, dubbed a “Twitter tsunami” by *Newsweek* (Powell 2014: 25), was incited by the activist journalism of the 2009 Academy Award-winning documentary *The Cove*, whose television counterpart in ocean conservation is Animal Planet’s coverage of the Sea Shepherds on *Whale Wars*. The documentary *Blackfish* exposed the plight of orcas suffering in captivity at Seaworld, extending the discourse on conservation through nonfiction media. Netflix’s ratings are now dominated by documentary series such as *Making a Murderer* (which has been favorably compared to HBO’s *The Jinx* and NPR’s *Serial* podcast) and *Planet Earth II*, a six-part nature series that has surpassed *X Factor* (the wildly popular British equivalent to *American Idol*) in 2016 on the viewing charts. As the BBC’s first documentary series shot in ultra-high definition, *Planet Earth II* stands as a landmark achievement in British media that has won over mass audiences and critics alike. Its status in the culture is underscored by its reception as “the greatest TV nature documentary to date” (Hooton 2016), a work whose achievement is directly linked to new technologies that have “enabled intimate high-definition close-ups and gasp-inducing aerial shots” taken with drones. Showcasing this new technology—perhaps the headlining attraction—are ten-minute making-of segments that accompany each episode, a feature underscoring the essential role of self-reflexivity that calls attention to the process of longform narrative production (Hogan 2016).

The erosion of generic boundaries traditionally separating film from television documentary has led to socially and politically important works such as ESPN’s 2016 Academy Award-winning magnum opus *O.J.: Made in America*. Featured at Cannes, Sundance, and Tribeca film festivals, this product of the makers of the acclaimed *30 for 30* cable television documentary series testifies to the versatility of transmedial narratology as it traversed media formats, industries, and cultures with impressive versatility. Beginning as a feature film aired in theatres with one or more intermissions, the work made its television debut in the first of five episodes on the network channel ABC, followed by the remaining four as a cable television miniseries on its parent station ESPN, which finally offered the entire series—suitable for binge watching—on its online platform WatchESPN. Netflix, which competes with WatchESPN’s streaming offerings, has capitalized on the surge in landmark documentary achievements, whose storytelling now rivals that of the best in the history of streaming television, as one commentator on Twitter called *O.J. “The Wire of documentaries”* (Proteau 2016). As the most successful subscription video on-demand service (SVOD), Netflix made a distinct turn toward documentaries beginning in 2013, when its Netflix Originals brand debuted. Over a four-year

period from 2013 to 2017, the total number of Netflix Originals grew from one to sixty. Strikingly, 41% of them were documentaries in 2017. Quality matched this sharp rise in quantity, as Netflix documentaries earned 7.4 out of 10, outperforming their fictional counterparts, which earned a 6.1 (Follows 2017).

Documentary journalism has inherited the bounty of a full-scale reinvention of television formatting and delivery through the SVOD streaming model. In the James MacTaggart Memorial Lecture to the British television industry, *House of Cards* actor Kevin Spacey extolled the virtues of the commercial and aesthetic power unleashed when streaming television escaped the conventional narrative limitations of the ninety-minute film and television's thirty-minute and one-hour time slots. The creative potential of theme, character development, intertwining plot lines, and *mise-en-scène* over the course of twelve episodes was now tantamount to producing a twenty-eight-hour film.

The radical experiment in on-demand streaming launched by Netflix with *House of Cards*—that led to the overwhelming successes of *Breaking Bad*, *Orange is the New Black*, and *Game of Thrones*—eschewed the conventional wisdom of running a pilot episode and shaping succeeding episodes accordingly. All networks originally expressed interest in the show, but demanded a pilot before committing to the project. Spacey (2013) explained, “It’s not that the producers were arrogant in not wanting to audition an idea, it was that we wanted to start to tell a story that would take a long time to tell.” He explained that “creating a sophisticated, multi-layered story with complicated characters, who would reveal themselves over time, and relationships would need *space* to play out” (Spacey 2013). That vision was incongruous with creating a forty-five-minute pilot that introduced all the characters and ended with an arbitrary cliffhanger. With the exorbitant cost of pilots at \$300–400 million per year in 2013, and the narrow survival rates of these shows (35 out of 113 reached air, of which only 13 were renewed after one season), the majority of projects had phased out within months (Spacey 2013). The two-season deal Netflix struck not only enabled such rich expansive storytelling, but also offered a more stable financial and thus creative arrangement akin to film industry contracts.

When approached with the proposal for *House of Cards*, Netflix ran its data, which indicated its viewers would watch the entire series (Spacey 2013). Creativity abounded on the serial template of interrelated episodes told without pressure to artificially generate suspense, bridge commercial breaks, or truncate plot sequences at the end of each installment. A larger canvas has never existed for the medium of televisual and cinematic art, mainly due to restrictions built into the industrial context of television that includes commercial breaks and station identification, in addition to film’s ritual of live screen debuts in theatres followed by sale online or on DVD for private consumption. The profit potential of abandoning conventional production and distribution practices would have been more attainable for Spacey’s (2013) Edinburgh International Television Festival audience of British programmers to realize, however,

without the near-monopoly over such programming by Netflix, which only recently has encountered competition from a variety of platforms such as Amazon, Hulu, HBO, and AppleTV.

Beyond Spacey, currently out of the industry due to sexual harassment charges, Hollywood actors have increasingly embraced the small screen via Netflix, signaling the rising cultural prestige of the online television series, which is further enabled by its ubiquity through media convergence. Interestingly, since the 2013 breakthrough of *House of Cards*, Netflix has established its own golden age of documentaries, from its original *Inside* business series to a host of blockbusters such as *Blackfish*, *Art and Copy*, and the series *Cosmos: A Spacetime Odyssey*, a curious blend of science, existential meditation on human limitation, and spiritual exaltation in the vastness of the universe through immersive special effects. The science documentary genre has recently enjoyed an embarrassment of riches of data for exact recreations of space. The *New York Times'* video of Pluto, for example, is based on data from the 2015 flyby of NASA's New Horizons spacecraft, allowing viewers to "stand where no known creature has ever stood" as "exotic ices shift under your feet," looking at this 360-degree otherworldly scene never before accessible in VR (Corum et al. 2016). The key difference between this and the *Cosmos* series is the degree of verisimilitude with which NASA generated the extraterrestrial setting.

As striking new technological advances for media production mount, material differences have diminished rapidly between first-run Hollywood feature films and such Netflix nonfictional features as *The Act of Killing* and *How to Survive a Plague*. Production technologies—cameras, sound recording, and editing—are now digital in both industries, and circulation through DVD and streaming are identical. The key difference between film and television is that the former is still produced as a self-contained text, whereas, with some exceptions, television appears as a series of episodes. Unlike one-off film texts, with the exception of the thorough franchising of some titles like *Star Wars* through books, comics, video games, and sequels, television series "offer ongoing storyworlds, presenting specific opportunities and limitations for creating compelling narratives" that extend across multiple episodes and seasons (Pearson and Smith 2015: 5).

A distinguishing characteristic of the docu-series genre lies in its power to transform materially the lives of its featured subjects as well as the journalists who make them. In the series *30 Days*, a Mexican immigrant to the USA receives money for college from an online funding campaign initiated by viewers (Baym and Gottert 2013: 166). In *The Jinx*, the series' subject was arrested for murder soon after making an inadvertent comment exposing his guilt in the last episode while wired with a live microphone (Hamilton 2016). Subjectivity, typically viewed as anathema to the ideal of reportorial objectivity, and which became a hallmark of literary journalistic narrative with the New Journalists of the mid-twentieth century, is showcased throughout these and other titles examined in this book.

## Documentary's Analytical Aesthetic

The renaissance of narrative journalism online has benefitted tremendously from the cultural ascendancy of documentary film. British filmmaker John Grierson, who originally coined the term “documentary,” understood the genre as both an aesthetic “dramatic apprehension of the modern scene” and a sociologically significant tool to serve the public interest as a bulwark for principled journalism (as quoted in Baym and Gottert 2013). John J. Pauly (2011) has similarly located a major distinguishing feature of literary journalism in its civic engagement, that originally sprung from the New Journalists’ desire for alternative modes of cultural expression that traditional news media was ill-equipped to facilitate. The film scholar Bill Nichols (1991) sees documentary film’s narrative power as having a close “kinship” with other “nonfictional systems” including education, politics, and religion. The nonfictional modes of discourse all operate according to the premise that “they can and should alter the world” and “affect action and entail consequences.” Herein lies the “instrumental power” of nonfictional narrative, particularly in the documentary cinematic form envisioned by Nichols (1991: 3), whose emphasis on civic efficacy, however, tends to elide the aesthetic dimension.

Nonfiction aesthetics form the focus of Renov’s (1993) “Toward a Poetics of Documentary Film,” a study that applies David Bordwell’s findings on narrative cinema to documentary film. The “truth claim” of documentary film sets it above fictional features, in essence saying, “Believe me, I am of the world,” he explains. It “is at the baseline of all nonfiction, from propaganda to rock doc” (Renov 1993: 30). At the core of the aesthetic is analysis, which draws the viewer into the narrative through the use of fictional techniques such as scene-setting, character development, and plot-driven suspense. Once immersed, viewers adopt the critical consciousness inherent in the genre, which digital longform journalism and paratextual online material among television viewers have created and relished. At heart a journalistic attribute, especially in the longform narrative tradition, “analysis is the cerebral reflex of the record/reveal/preserve modality; it is the revelation interrogated” (Renov 1993: 30).

This analytical quality—reportage as revelation interrogated—distinguishes the surge in narrative journalism that approaches subjects and events from a deeper perspective, anatomizing them scientifically and psychologically, driving home both fact and the drama of lived human experience. Beyond recording, revealing, and preserving, digital longform works such as the *New York Times’* “Snow Fall” dramatize the analysis (which can range from forensic to psychosocial) with a documentarian’s rigor. Swiss scientists, for example, were consulted on the data visualization demonstrating the geological dynamics behind weight and velocity of the avalanche that all but three skiers outraced. The *Guardian’s* “NSA Files: Decoded” analytical dimension is evident in its parsing of data privacy through interactives revealing—and indeed

decoding through explication—the risks of personal information in everyday use of social and other online media. Analysis and context have become the signatures of a group of alternative outlets such as *Delayed Gratification*, which operates at a critical distance from the ceaseless torrent of breaking digital news through its deliberately slow journalism. The quarterly edited in the UK by Rob Orchard selects the most important news over the course of three months and probes it with in-depth reporting and state-of-the-art graphic data visualizations. The resulting narrative nonfiction and meticulous charts and graphs—available free on their website to encourage their spread through social media as a type of loss leader—are the professionally produced counterpart to amateur and fan-produced peripheral texts.

Representing this hunger for data dramatically and analytically rendered is the paratextual production of charts and lists by viewers of fictional television series. Their

analytic orientations aim to better understand what is happening within the text, orientations of expansion look outward extratextually to connect the series with other realms beyond the core program, whether it is another fictional series or aspects of the real world.

(Mittell 2013: 171)

Those peripheral texts have evolved into “making-of” films, actor biographies, and other documentarian projects produced by both the main text’s media company and viewers. The process is inclined toward transmedial narratology, as new peripheral texts hybridize media forms to produce new narratives.

Individuals “get immersed in the intertextual web and passionately argue about interpretations concerning the validity of various connections” about main media texts that range well beyond their favorite television shows (Mittell 2013: 171). The thriving online forum of literature readers on *Goodreads* bears witness to this hunger to discuss, document, and dissect the contemporary social and political world.

Longform journalistic products similarly aim to spark online interaction through provocative topics such as the alarming increase in construction of impassable walls on national borders in the *Washington Post*’s “A New Age of Walls.” The piece operates as a broader deeper examination—equal parts multimedia feature and “explainer” story—than offered by breaking news leading up to the 2016 US presidential election. Reports of the political rhetoric of wall-building and isolationist policy fanning into a fiery nationalist furor across Europe and the USA left readers wanting a more substantive and thorough account (Dowling 2017). The *Post*’s profound meditation on the topic and other similarly crafted digital longform pieces in essence provide their own paratextual materials editorially aligned to the story itself, enabling readers to remain in one closed yet diverse cognitive container (Dowling and

Vogan 2015). Storytelling in such an environment occurs on a deeper analytic plane than other breaking news platforms typically provide.

Humanizing personal stories with emotional empathetic import placed within the context of learned national debate is the mainstay of narrative journalism as it has emerged in the age of media convergence. The thriving subculture of vlogging, for example, sparked Shay Carl's concept for *Vlogumentary*, a work highlighting the socially progressive and psychologically beneficial presence of celebrity YouTubers. To lend credibility to the genre commonly stereotyped as superficial diversion, Carl simultaneously drew on the celebrity of Morgan Spurlock and the cultural cache of the documentary form. As the film's producer, Spurlock's mindful (yet undeniably playful) journalistic reputation (prior to his 2017 admission to sexual misconduct) at the time lent respectability to the subjects, who included the brothers John and Hank Green, known for franchizing their YouTube fame into the book and film industries through *The Fault in Our Stars*, among other titles. Carl approached Spurlock to elevate the status of *Vlogumentary*, especially since *Time* named him among the Top Ten Journalists in the World after his *SuperSize Me* exposé of McDonald's changed not only the discourse surrounding fast food and over-consumption, but also the menu of the ubiquitous multinational corporate chain.

The context for the production of *Vlogumentary* points to the ongoing tensions between art and commerce across media industries. Havens and Lotz (2016) have generated a useful framework for understanding the process by which aesthetic content and ideological meaning is shaped. Influencing that meaning are three forces: *mandates*, defined as the organization's main purpose; *conditions*, which include technological regulations, and economics within broader media industries; and *practices* embodied by myriad professional roles and activities that make up day-to-day operations. These forces circumscribe, but do not eliminate altogether, agency and self-expression, as seen in the replacement of individual bylines with teams consisting of graphic designers, analytics specialists, software engineers, and data visualization professionals in addition to the author, who is increasingly no longer the lone wolf reporter, especially for narrative journalism produced for digital spaces. *Vlogumentary*'s industrial context is far more complex than the single vision of Shay Carl operating in isolation from market forces. Indeed, when the film was released online, YouTube audiences flocked, assuming it would be free only to discover that a trial subscription to the (ironically) ad-free YouTube Red was required for viewing. The mandate of YouTube in this case to use *Vlogumentary* as a promotional tool for YouTube Red disrupted the commonly recognized ad-free conditions prevailing over celebrity YouTube online presence. Indeed, the prospect of charging for the ad-free experience betrayed viewers familiar with the customary practice of YouTube production as taking place without corporate intermediation mitigating their access to their favorite celebrities, except through sponsorship via advertising. But what many viewers soon realized was

that *Vlogumentary* itself was designed as an elaborate PR campaign, not only sanitizing and promoting the culture of vlogging on behalf of YouTube, but to capture one of the largest online audiences in internet history in order to sell them YouTube Red, a premium ad-free experience.

## Theorizing Immersive Nonfiction Media

Hernandez and Rue (2016) and Giles and Hitch (2018) offer useful classifications of the various types of digital news packaging and journalism's narrativity through digital media. Thompson's (2014) treatment of the evolution of media toward increasingly sophisticated digital design explores digital technology's cultural impact on cognition and reading practices. His study touts the evolution of electronic media toward more sophisticated and challenging narratives. Rose's (2011) examination of transmedia storytelling for advertising and promotional purposes converges with chapters on branded documentaries and multimedia stories. This book's broader aim is to explore the intersection of industrial imperatives and storytelling, especially what Usher (2014) describes as news media's new imperative to hire interactive journalists. "Managers see the merit both editorially and economically of encouraging content that keeps people on the page and plays to the new ways users consume content online," a pattern she observed in the *New York Times* (Usher 2014: 183). Interactive journalism deepens audience engagement in more complex ways than views and session time alone can measure (Usher 2016).

Audience is understood throughout this book via the social impact of digital media and the attention economy (Webster 2014). The implications of how "audiences circulate across media offerings" rather than retreating into online filter bubbles frame my concern for the rapid increase of deep storytelling online. "The widening gap between limitless media and limited attention makes it a challenge for anything to attract an audience," a premise directly relevant to this book (Webster 2014: 4). Webster's (2014) discussion of the fragmentation of online audiences informs my intervention into the appeal of digital longform as a factor of digital longtail marketing.

Grau's (2003) research has informed critical inquiries into immersive media, particularly the premise that art practice is driven by the principle of surrounding users completely in a space of visual illusion. His main emphasis is on immersive strategy, which I of course take into consideration, yet with an emphasis on the evolution of narrative aesthetics through specific digital design features catering to mobile audiences of journalistic content. Further, I complicate his purview that posits that all creative works strive to immerse audiences in a different mental state "characterized by a diminishing critical distance to what is shown and increasing emotional involvement in what is happening" (Grau 2003: 13). My perspective instead considers the narrative theory advanced by twentieth-century dramatist

Bertolt Brecht that suggests that depth of critical thought need not be in a zero-sum game with emotional involvement, but that the two can instead play on each other much in the way listeners to *Serial* are emotionally engaged in the events narrated, but intermittently challenged to reflect deductively on their causes and ethically on their consequences. My argument thus departs from Grau's particularly in its focus on the interplay between emotional involvement and critical distance unique to journalistic longform rather than fictional media products.

## VR Journalism and the Mobile Audience

Augmented reality, especially in the form of situated documentaries, "better engage citizens and provide more context, nuance, and texture to reported events and issues," according to Pavlik and Bridges (2013: 4). New media's potential for increased user engagement is particularly evident in 360-degree video and its unique capacity for narrative transportation, which leverages the rhetorical methods of fiction to intensify the sense of immediacy in a nonfictional lived event rather than escapist fantasy (Atkins et al. 2017). In VR stories (viewed through head-mounted displays, or HMDs), imagery plays a crucial role in the effects of narrative transportation (Green and Brock 2002). There are significant differences, for example, between the effects of VR stories, 360-degree video, and text on presence, memory, credibility, empathy, and sharing (Sundar et al. 2017).

Chapters on online interactive documentary video draw on research on early adopters of the medium who, in 2015, were among the first to produce 360-degree immersive journalism films. In this focus group, Jones (2017) determines the medium's range of effectiveness according to narrative type, results with powerful implications for the evolution of the medium's new visual storytelling conventions. Discussion of immersive media and digital longform journalism draws on research on wearable and mobile technologies (Pavlik 2016; Healey and Stephens 2017). The pioneering study of how VR journalism and HMDs place audiences "inside the news event" (de la Peña et al. 2010) also factor into my analysis of the heightened effects of immediacy and subjectivity in immersive media. More recent research that builds on de la Peña's (2010) early findings focuses on whether immersive journalism enhances empathy (Sanchez Laws 2017), a concern relevant to the question of how the emergent range of narrative techniques in these rapidly evolving media forms is engaging audiences more deeply than ever. The Columbia Tow Center for Journalism's *Virtual Reality Journalism* applies directly to the chapters on interactive documentary video, and bears important implications for other immersive media. VR's pivot to mobile through innovations such as Google Daydream, an entirely mobile HMD designed for use with smartphones, marks a major technological innovation fueling the rise of immersive media.

Mobile technology is vital to the core argument of this book. Mobile audiences are consuming richer, more nuanced and contextualized narratives than ever despite alarmist warnings regarding the impending threat of new media to diminish attention spans of online audiences. Indeed, podcasting epitomizes how immersive storytelling has captured mobile audiences, as nearly 70% of downloads originate from mobile devices, rather than laptops or desktops, according to an Edison report on media use cited by Pew (Mitchell et al. 2016: 65). Further, multimedia digital design features have distinctly evolved toward cleaner, less-cluttered content designed specifically for consumption on small screens such as smartphones (Dowling 2017).

Digital culture now finds itself at an interesting moment where form is content, one that has important implications for the principles of journalism. This book's main focus on the evolution of multimedia nonfictional storytelling genres considers this leap forward in media history in terms of journalism's embrace of literary narrative. The evolution of narrative journalism in the digital age is important to the project, as is the labor of media producers, concerns that coalesce into the question of how industry and audience shape content and how users interact with digital publications. Reporting and writing are critical pieces of this puzzle, as evidenced in the example of Gabriel Dance's testimony regarding the creation of the *Guardian's* "NSA Files: Decoded." In a production process that inverted conventional digital journalism practice premised on the written medium preceding multimedia add-ons, the *Guardian's* began with the assembly of multimedia elements first, leaving the writing of the text for last (Hernandez and Rue 2016: 74–75). Such cases indicate how journalism practice is transforming in the digital age. As new storytelling methods evolve, "stylistic methods and norms in their infancy" have shifted the ethical terrain (Aronson-Rath et al. 2015).

Since documentary storytelling is behind all of the digital genres examined in this book—from the multimedia feature to interactive documentaries and podcasting—journalistic issues remain central. But the topic of journalistic production alone certainly does not subsume or dominate the cases of the binge watching TV revolution and the rise of online reading communities. Insofar as the subjects of these chapters deal with nonfiction narrative TV and books, they intersect with longform narrative journalism's growing audience. In the online world, the boundaries of the journalistic field are rapidly expanding (Eldridge 2018), and now encompass longer more absorbing content and extended (as in binge watching), interactive (visible in online reading communities) consumption practices.

The case study method of this book examines immersive media through the lens of exemplary multimedia features, interactive documentaries, podcasts, streaming on-demand television, and sponsored content in all of the above categories. The approach is informed by Pavlik and Bridges's (2013) framework defining four major ways in which technological change impacts media and

journalism. First, advanced technological tools have the potential to make media production more efficient, in the process altering the nature of the labor performed in gathering, reporting, writing, publishing, and distributing stories. I argue that the model of the lone-wolf reporter has yielded to more collaborative models involving an array of digital designers, engineers, and data visualization specialists who work in concert with writers and editors. Second, technology transforms the organizational structure of media companies, altering their business models, partnership arrangements, and marketing strategies. Branding values and functions thus shift toward a hybridized media model. Third, developments in technology create new relationships between media organizations and audiences, specifically opening up greater potential for increased transparency and participation. Fourth, advances in digital technology alter the basic distinguishing characteristics and defining features of media content, giving rise to new genres on large and multifaceted templates for storytelling (Pavlik and Bridges 2013).

The analysis of digital design accrues benefits from proper historical perspective. The meteoric rise of digital longform's highly contextualized and analytical narrative content, for example, can be understood as the latest phase of the ascent of literary journalism. The rise of the “nonfiction novel,” as Tom Wolfe called longform narrative journalism in the mid-twentieth century—which he urged was the form that would eclipse the novel itself in importance and popularity—sees its latest counterpart in the digital literary journalism that Robert S. Boynton (2013) describes as “the supreme nonfiction.” New digital forms enable precisely the sort of highly engaging and entertaining storytelling of the previous century’s first nonfiction revolution that extended from print to film, as documentary ascended to the status of the art form known as *cinéma vérité*. Then, as now, journalism developed a distinct aesthetic that foregrounded subjectivity and heightened the visceral human intensity of lived experience. I thus situate such contemporary milestone achievements as the multimedia feature “Snow Fall” (whose design was improved upon for mobile audiences in works such as “The New Age of Walls”) and the podcast *Serial* (whose popularity is now surpassed by that of *S-Town*) with respect to their twentieth-century predecessors in the genres of the magazine feature and the serial radio drama.

Historical dimensions of each medium will be presented in light of the ongoing remediation of older forms. In podcasting, for example, there is a clear remediation of serially produced absorbing dramatic audio narratives associated the golden age of radio from the first half of the twentieth century. Those methods of drawing out tension by heightening suspense through possible outcomes has raised questions regarding the journalistic ethics of this technique not only in podcasting, but also in documentary and multimedia storytelling that incorporates hypothetical and meta-narrative interludes.

## Narrative Journalism in the Digital Age

The ensuing chapter examines the revolutionary impact of “Snow Fall” on digital journalism. Often regarded as the exclusive domain of expensive prestige projects of large legacy news organizations such as *Sports Illustrated* and the *New York Times*, or considered the products of niche or boutique journalism outlets, the multimedia feature has taken over mainstream digital media. Immersive works now appear in a “cognitive container” with the feel of an ad-free multimedia space conducive to the extended time on page demanded by literary journalism (Dowling and Vogan 2015). Case studies include the *Atavist*’s “Love for My Enemies,” “The Mastermind,” and *Mother Jones*’s award-winning “My Four Months as Private Prison Guard.”

The second chapter explores social media and the online reading revival. Deep reading associated with the literary mind has now found its counterpart in immersive nonfictional media. Reading groups of nonfictional works have formed online to discuss the finer points of lengthy works of contemporary social and political significance. Media convergence has enabled the formation of Twitter communities such as #1book140 and the online forum *Goodreads* dedicated to the discussion of sophisticated literary journalism. This chapter argues that the internet has enriched rather than diminished the role of textured narrative in our intellectual and social lives, ironically providing the media for the most salient movements in support of the deep reading of literary journalism.

Chapter 3 details on-demand TV and the binge watching revolution. The cord-cutting backlash against cable television packages has seen a sharp rise in on-demand streaming television, inspiring producers to apply the dramatic series template to nonfictional subjects. This is a departure from traditional broadcast TV dramas—whose duration is indefinite because it is based entirely on ratings—that have suffered from the liability of depleting the creative resources of writers. Within the genre of true crime inspired by *American Horror Story*, *American Crime Story* has sparked the category of the anthology series that follows a finite narrative arc, thus allowing more unified and coherent storytelling. Binge watching arises from media products developed to cohere to a narrative aesthetic that hybridizes the literary traditions of the novel and the anthology. *Narcos* (Netflix), *Waco* (Paramount), and the Martin Scorsese-produced *Long Strange Trip* (Amazon) are examined in light of documentary binge watching’s rise via Ken Burns’ 1990 *The Civil War* (PBS) and the advent of the DVD box set in 2000.

Content marketing’s immersive transmedia storytelling is the subject of chapter four. With the new premium for advertising moving clearly toward engaged time rather than clicks, companies have now sought longer immersive advertising content with the feel of an involving journalistic documentary video. The rise of content marketing directly caters to internet users’ demand for free content. Content marketers thus invested in developing textured pieces

ideal for immersive mobile phone and tablet viewing. Marketers did not overlook how their branded content could circulate through social media as sharable markers of prestige. Jenkins et al.'s (2013) work on spreadable media informs this chapter's focus on branded documentary videos that include *Inside: Chipotle*, Salomon's *On the Road*, and ESPN/Disney's *The Evolution of the Lightsaber Duel*.

Chapter 5's intervention into audio immersion takes up the case of the podcast. *Serial*, NPR's epic true crime narrative, was a milestone in the history of podcasting, attracting millions of listeners who went online to discuss the riveting story. Along with Ira Glass's *This American Life*, which has brought longform journalism into prominence through the medium of the podcast, the success of *Serial* has spawned a host of similar entries into the genre including *S-Town*, in addition to subject-produced experiments such as *Ear Hustle*. The journalistic technique of humanizing the reporter, whose voice is included in the story at various crucial interludes, drew on older forms associated with literary journalism that honored rather than restricted the narrator's subjectivity and/or presence in the story as a character influencing events. This chapter considers the podcast's unique attributes that have attracted the coveted millennial audience, as evidenced by the success of startups such as Gimlet Media (spotlighted by *Forbes* in 2016), specializing in story-centered longform immersive journalistic podcasting.

Chapters 6 and 7 respectively provide the theoretical framework for interactive documentaries and delve into representative case studies. Google's "Moon Shot" and "Beyond the Map" demonstrate corporate synergies converging into promotional media. Google's strategy of crowdsourcing the technology necessary to create an online map of the moon is discussed, along with the company's efforts to bridge the digital divide via the digital mapping of previously offline communities such as the low-income, historically unmapped urban area of Brazil's Rio de Janeiro known as the Favelas. *Sports Illustrated's* docu-series "Capturing Everest" was the first complete ascent of Everest shot in VR (virtual-reality film technology). Shot in April and May of 2016, the piece features footage from nearly two months of daily video elements. With body-mounted, stationary, and zipline rigging, filming techniques build on the moving GoPro scenes in "Snow Fall" depicting the avalanche survivors' emotional discovery of their friends' bodies in the aftermath of a fatal avalanche. Broken into segments longer than the three-to-five-minute average for VR experiences represented by *Times* Op-Docs such as "Meditate by the Ocean" and "Be Still Among the Redwoods" inviting brief yet mindful immersion in nature ("let yourself immerse into this world, this landscape," the meditation guide calmly advises), "Capturing Everest" is explored as a case study of corporate synergies leveraging cross-platform immersive storytelling for promotion of *SI's* brand as well as those of the advertisers carried in the piece. The film, whose trailer aired at Sundance Film Festival in early 2017, was touted as a milestone achievement in documentary film.

The conclusion undertakes an analysis of documentary filmmakers Morgan Spurlock and Louie Psihogios, journalists who have leveraged immersion reporting methods. It expands the scope of discussion to include reportorial methods in which journalists are engrossed in an all-consuming and typically foreign cultural milieu in order to penetrate the depths of a world largely invisible to mainstream culture. The film industry's elaborate system of product placement is Spurlock's subject in *Pom Wonderful Presents: The Greatest Movie Ever Sold*. In his 2009 Academy Award-winning film *The Cove*, Psihogios investigates the remote seaside village of Taiji, Japan, where rampant dolphin slaughter takes place. Blocked by police, Psihogios deploys covert tactics and surveillance technologies associated with special military operations to capture the events taking place in the secret cove. Though less adversarial in his method, Spurlock's immersion journalism similarly exposes the elaborate inner workings of an industry deeply connected to corporate interests by financing his entire film through product placement. Self-reflexivity is the hallmark of both filmmakers, who signal the age of journalistic documentary film that showcases its own processes of production for an immersive viewing experience into the world of immersion journalism. It is to documentary film's unmistakable influence on multimedia feature storytelling sparked by "Snow Fall" and its legacy, the work that dawned the new age of narrative journalism, that we now turn.

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# 1

## MULTIMEDIA NARRATIVES

### The “Snow Fall” Revolution and Beyond

After the *New York Times*' late 2012 publication of “Snow Fall: Avalanche at Tunnel Creek” dramatically inaugurated a new era of immersive reading online, digital publishers recognized the real reason why longform had failed to thrive in the early 2000s. “We always used to say you couldn’t read longform online,” according to Rob Orchard, editor of the highly acclaimed British quarterly *Delayed Gratification*. Because early news templates divided stories into multiple pages to maximize advertising space—which left the internet itself teeming with shallow content and distraction technologies vying for the reader’s attention—the assumption was “you needed print in order to concentrate.” Now as new digital affordances have given rise to the latest wave of enthralling multimedia narratives that capture rather than divide reader attention, “that’s not the case anymore,” as Orchard notes, “and I think it was a very simple question of getting the design right” (Kuntze 2016).

The early internet’s ad-laden click-heavy customs were indeed anathema to deep reading online. But since the *Times*' breakthrough, a profusion of immersive media products leveraging its signature self-contained design have emerged with embedded photos, maps, and videos in app-like environments. Their multimedia elements are now integrated with written text, working in concert to intensify reader concentration (Dowling and Vogan 2015). Such advances in digital design have delivered precisely the opposite of what we have feared about the death of deep reading in the digital age. Contrary to what we have assumed, technological improvements borrowing heavily from the visual storytelling techniques of cinema have deepened the way we engage with narrative, transforming news consumption from article reading to an immersive multimedia experience.

Digital longform's repertoire of rhetorical expression has never been so rich, and thus suggests how “The diversity of games that narrative can play with the

resources of its medium is one of the many reasons that make the intersection of narratology and media studies, an area still largely unexplored, into a productive field of investigation” (Ryan 2005: 21). This chapter tracks the fierce evolution of digital longform, also referred to as multimedia features and digital news packages, which has joined podcasting as one of the fastest-growing online genres of the twenty-first century. Design innovations have transformed both digital publishing and online reading, which has revolutionized written text by wedding it to—rather than pitting it in opposition against—graphics, sound, photography, and video to realize unprecedented powers of expression through immersive storytelling.

### **Blurred Boundaries and Broken Rules**

The digital production of the *New York Times*’ “Snow Fall” epitomizes the recent departure from the print tradition of the single-byline story. John Branch acknowledged his debt to the team of graphic designers, computer engineers, photographers, videographers, and data visualization specialists who contributed to the Pulitzer Prize-winning piece (Q. and A. 2012) that was lauded for its “deft integration of multimedia elements” (as quoted in Haughney 2013). Branch, of course, relied on his team of producers not only to create each visual element—from Swiss Institute scientists contributing data sets on avalanche dynamics to graphic artists designing digitally animated maps—but also a staff of editors to integrate them into a coherent narrative. “Snow Fall” designer Graham Roberts’s description of the project as the employment of “a new format of publishing longform stories that attempts to seamlessly combine the written story with multimedia elements” (Roberts 2013) indicates the vast amount of editorial intervention necessary for the successful synthesis of those elements. Platforms such as *Byliner* and *Atavist* still market celebrity authors, such as John Krakauer and Michael Sharer, thus adhering to traditional single-contributor bylines. The persistence of journalistic tradition of single bylines indeed earned Branch most of the notoriety for “Snow Fall,” as he was the named recipient of the Pulitzer, whereas Roberts remained relatively anonymous among the team of other designers and computer engineers.

The increasingly collaborative nature of online narrative journalism suggests a shift away from the assumption that fine storytelling is necessarily the product of a single creative genius or lone-wolf reporter operating in isolation (Kovacs 2016). This opens up exciting new possibilities for creative collaboration, as Branch recognized of the monumental achievement of “Snow Fall” (Q. and A. 2012). Foucault’s “What is an Author?” and Roland Barthes’s “The Death of the Author” help illuminate this shift toward the collaborative production of literary journalism, which now weds written and visual aesthetics with computer engineering design. Just as production processes are becoming more networked as the products themselves become increasingly multimodal, their consumption has

become distinctly more social. Narrative journalism in the digital age is now more mobile, sharable and open to discussion than ever, as “audiences show an increasing preference for online content,” making the latest serious journalism either a combination of online and traditional or *only* online (Bakker 2014: 596). The socialization of literary journalistic production has become radically pluralized much in the way that readership has through communities such as *Longreads*.

The pastiche of sources any author inherits—identified by Roland Barthes (1977), who deconstructs the romantic myth of the isolated writer as individual genius—points to the wealth of influences and data the writer must patch together. Like Barthes’s concept of the author as the sum total of his/her intellectual inheritance, craftily rearranged in a unique expression, so too is the longform journalist in the digital age not only drawing from narrative and aesthetic precedent—whether reflecting or refracting it—but producing in a digital environment that requires teamwork and collaboration with data analysts and designers. “To give a text an author,” writes Barthes (1977), “is to impose a limit on the text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. When the author has been found, the text is ‘explained’—victory to the critic” (147). It is telling indeed that the myth of single authorship has now yielded to Webby and Addy awards going to teams rather than individuals. The internet has destabilized the professional identity of narrative journalism, steering it closer to a model of film production, in which various designations including screen-writing and directing receive recognition rather than a single isolated figure.

In addition to the blurring of the category of solo bylines into production teams, the strict division separating business from advertising in news organizations has also eroded with the advent of new digital forms (Banet-Weiser 2012; Einstein 2016). Joe Sexton, who initiated “Snow Fall” from the sports desk of the *Times*, earned accolades despite claiming to have little technological savvy. Yet whatever digital expertise Sexton lacked, his business acumen in promoting the piece was strong enough to lead him to Twitter as the promotional medium to spark pre-publicity interest in “Snow Fall.” In an interview at Harvard University, Sexton recounted how he had violated several cardinal rules of the profession in order to publish the piece. In the years prior to the project, he had been experimenting with alternative storytelling as a method of promoting and marketing the *Times*. Among other bold deviations from convention was his placement of a massive photo across the fold of the sports section depicting Walden Pond at dusk with a lone long-distance swimmer gliding through the glass-like water in the foreground corner. The reflective feature profile of Olympian Alex Meyer, a particularly Thoreauvian and self-reliant member of the Harvard swim team, defied the standard coverage of recent scores and highlights, venturing into the obscure yet rich territory of more thoughtful reflective content (Crouse 2011). This ambitious maverick project foreshadowed the colossal one ahead.

The stories Sexton ran began stretching the limits of not only the sports section, but also the standard divisions of news categories. “How are you going

to fit 16,000 words in six chapters on a ski tragedy,” of three backcountry skiers who lost their lives in an avalanche in western Washington, “in your story? What section will that be in?” Sexton’s colleagues asked him. “Forget the sections,” he replied. “We are going to create our own section.” In the process, Sexton had made a crucial administrative step allowing for his production team to reinvent ossified routines of journalistic production by breaking “every rule at the *New York Times* that existed and didn’t exist” in this “unnecessarily restrictive” news organization he described as “simultaneously majestic and hopelessly f—d up.” Graphics editor Steve Duenes showed Sexton a story by ESPN on Doc Ellis’s no-hitter he pitched for the Pittsburgh Pirates while hallucinating on LSD. After seeing its psychedelic aesthetic expressed through an integrated design featuring elaborate drawings and interactives, Sexton felt emboldened to pursue a similar project (Nieman 2013).

*Times* upper administration was initially hesitant to enlist their support. Then-editor-in-chief Jill Abramson struggled to justify the story as news, since it was neither political nor had any immediate timely connection to an issue related to the latest headlines, a core journalistic element of even the lengthiest features. Any initial concerns regarding the story’s departure from traditional definitions of news were soon quelled, however, by the record-breaking reception of the piece. Its 3.5 million page views boasted an average visit that was ten times longer than the industry norm at the time, making it one of the most forwarded pieces in internet history. Abramson’s internal memo to the *Times* staff heralded the achievement as “a cool moment in the evolution of our online storytelling” (Romanesco 2012). According to Sexton, the confluence of image and word was the key to its success. “My favorite map is the one that enables you to follow individual skiers down Tunnel Creek, and they would move in time with your reading,” a key feature that successfully met the narrative challenge of covering the experiences of sixteen skiers as they outraced the on-rushing avalanche, not knowing how many had survived, unaware until well after the tragedy that three of their group had died. These were “story-telling challenges far more basic than sexy web-stuff” (Nieman 2013). The discovery of one of the victims is immortalized in an embedded video shot with a Go-Pro mounted to the helmet of a surviving skier who is overwhelmed with emotion upon finding the metonymic ski pole revealing the location of his companion’s body beneath the snow.

Sexton explained that sequencing and embedding the multimedia elements posed an editorial challenge that was fundamentally narrative rather than purely technological. With proper restraint, a powerfully immersive experience designed to sustain and lengthen reader attention could be achieved. “Part of the rationale for doing it this way was to get away from the distraction of having to leave the written story to go somewhere completely elsewhere and experience a video or a graphic.” Instead the idea was to enable readers “to experience those things—at least theoretically—seamlessly” (Nieman 2013). Indeed, blending those elements

into a coherent whole in its own self-contained package carried the benefit of shielding the reader from the distractions of the open web.

This “closed system” is “non-referential” (Lassila-Merisalo 2014) in the sense that it creates a cognitive container characterized by an internally coherent news package. Digital longform maintains the feel of a container associated with print newspapers, in which headlines and visuals are arranged to complement one another, as opposed to the distracting nature of the internet, in which headlines are crafted to vie for attention independently as disaggregated autonomous units circulating online (Dowling and Vogan 2015). Interestingly, “Snow Fall” reached the majority of its readers as a shared story through social media, and thus as precisely such disaggregated news. Yet unlike the conventional news template, its multimedia were not indiscriminately tacked on, but carefully integrated into the narrative world as a system of mutually reinforcing referents. By circulating mainly as an autonomous story disaggregated from its publisher’s main landing page, “Snow Fall” represented an ideal opportunity to convey the *New York Times* brand. Furthermore, its distinct advantage was its vertical rather than horizontally oriented page layout. In digital longform, the visual hierarchy and semantics of multimedia sequencing pull readers down, rather than across, the page to a variety of headlines, so that written and graphic content combine as the main signifying features (Hernandez and Rue 2016; Hiippala 2016).

This immersive design’s cinematic qualities are not without their commercial appeal. In a promotional maneuver common in the film industry yet unprecedented in journalistic media, the *Times* produced a Hollywood-style trailer to promote “Snow Fall.” Upper administration, however, expressed concern that this first-ever video trailer to promote a single story would only play into the hands of their competitors. “News organizations are strikingly bad at promoting themselves because they believe it’s somehow untoward or unbecoming as their stock price [plummets],” Sexton recalled. After seeing the trailer, his senior editors advised him not to share any portion of it or “word would get out,” clearly a vestige of a bygone era in which editors feared being scooped. Of course, news of the avalanche had already been covered six months prior by local news media, whose stories circulated globally online when the event occurred. Violating their directive, Sexton resolved to send the trailer out late the night before its scheduled release the next day, allowing the promotional clip roughly thirty hours to go viral and stir a sensation on the internet. The *Times*’ reporters boasting the largest following on Twitter, such as Nick Kristof, then tweeted out the news of this revolutionary piece that foretold the future of digital narrative and multimedia storytelling (Nieman 2013).

Sexton confessed that he intentionally had them tweet out the trailer overnight to circumvent his senior editors, who wanted none of this valuable material pre-released. He returned the next morning to find the “senior editor seething, ‘What the f—did you do?’” to which he replied, “I just gave it to the Twitter guys.” Senior management then demanded the entire project be released immediately.

However, “the server they had built for the trailer had collapsed,” and they were unable to release the entire story despite the mounting legions of readers on Twitter clamoring for it. The technical difficulties that caused the delay actually worked inadvertently as an ingenious marketing method to whet the appetite of the audience, thereby increasing demand and circulation through social media prior to the publication of the story by 3PM. “The clouds had been seeded, people were actually looking forward to something.” But senior management saw Sexton, according to his recollection, “as the most heretical person who ever lived,” absurdly asking, “Why would we promote our work?” In retrospect, Sexton knew that “Had we just launched it at three that afternoon” without the Twitter promotional trailer, “it would have looked nice on the homepage and everybody would have felt good about themselves,” but the fanfare would not have reached a fever pitch in anticipation of the release. This release of “Snow Fall” was the first ever work promoted on Twitter in advance of its publication, now a much more common, if not routine, practice among news organizations intent on generating publicity for a particular feature (Nieman 2013).

Digital longform’s implications for media convergence thus expand beyond the internally coherent multimodal storytelling of its content to its industrial function within the context of the digital environment for news branding promotion. Not only does the piece openly borrow cinematic tropes such as establishing shots and wipe transitions through graphic animated fly-over mapping, looping videos, and parallax scrolling; its pre-publication marketing also deployed a cinematic trailer. But far from entering the film industry, the *Times* was instead intent on borrowing its narrative power not only to enhance its journalistic storytelling, but to promote its brand. Indeed, Sexton’s concern was to market both “Snow Fall” and the *Times* brand. In the process, he had defied two cardinal rules of journalistic practice: never leak a story prior to publication and never transgress the sacred divide between editorial and business (Dowling and Vogan 2017). His success that eventuated in shattering both taboos in effect proved to the news industry that the ontological world of the digital ecosystem had advanced to a stage that warranted an entirely new epistemological approach to journalism.

## **Reclaiming the Written Word in Multimodal Narrative**

The subject of “Snow Fall” lent itself well to the digital longform, primarily due to the highly televisual nature of the sport of downhill skiing. Branch and Sexton’s team of producers accordingly capitalized on that appeal through embedded footage of spectacular backcountry descents through powdery forests and treacherous cliffs reminiscent of the best Warren Miller ski films that glory in the kinetic visual aesthetic of the sport. When faced with less-televisual subject matter on topics drawn from politics rather than the world of sports, publication in a multimedia format presents producers with a unique challenge.

The *Guardian* faced precisely this challenge, for example, when approaching the highly technical and politically abstract topic of privacy and personal data in “NSA Files: Decoded.” Then-editor directing production Gabriel Dance confessed that, like Joe Sexton, he violated a core principle of journalistic production practice. Normally art follows copy in the advertising industry, just as reporting and writing in the world of journalism precede the placement of photos and multimedia around the text. Dance took the reverse approach and directed the assembly of the multimedia elements and digital design before the writing (Hernandez and Rue 2016: 74).

Charged with the colossal task of building a multimedia feature showcasing the *Guardian*’s rich repository of evidence provided by Edward Snowden, Dance immediately recognized that his subject matter might pose difficulties for such a project, especially given the interactive and visually appealing standard for the form set by “Snow Fall.” “We didn’t really have any lovely video or photos to run with it, so we knew the design would be more important,” he explained. A “fundamentally text-first approach” applies “annotations (video, photo, document, etc.) that would appear alongside the text as you got to a particular point in the story” (quoted in Hernandez and Rue 2016: 75). But this traditional approach soon failed them because of the unusually large quantity of interviews and primary source documentation they needed to display. Shortly into the three-month project, the team abandoned the writing until they had fully assembled the piece as a multimedia interactive experience, a method diametrically opposed to new production practice rooted in the primacy of the written word. Deviation from the industry standard of placing the written story first (Lassila-Merisalo 2014), however, proved vital to their success. “The real reason the project came together as well as it did,” according to Dance’s formulation, “is that the thing that was done last, and let me emphasize *last*, was the words” (quoted in Hernandez and Rue 2016: 75).

The *Guardian* team initially did not anticipate writing the text of “NSA Files: Decoded” in the wake of the construction of the digital design and installation of all animating media elements. Instead, this unconventional approach emerged organically out of a re-discovery of writing’s unique power as an adaptive medium. The flexibility of the written word in digital spaces carries great potential for generating cultural capital (Lanham 2006; Usher 2016). Writing text first and assembling multimedia elements in the margins later struck them as counterintuitive at the storyboard stage. Compared to the demands of multimedia production, “the written words are by far the most fungible part of the project,” they discovered. One can “rewrite a lead pretty quickly” and “into and out of things in the blink of an eye.” Text can be produced instantly on demand compared to media such as video. If a particular video were missing it could not be created on the spot, and thus the project would be forced to do without. “Video takes a long time to recut and render,” unlike writing, just as “interactives are not easy to change when they are done” (quoted in Hernandez and Rue 2016: 75).

Although it would appear that the written word was subordinated to a secondary role to the multimedia elements of “NSA Files: Decoded,” the *Guardian* team paradoxically discovered a new appreciation for the power of words in connecting those elements with a through-line of narrative coherence. “It was a revelation that speaks to the power of words,” Dance recalled, “that they are so flexible and so strong and so malleable that the idea of making them the last thing you do is anathema to most journalists.” The work of journalism prior to the advent of digital longform has been understood as “primarily copy” (quoted in Hernandez and Rue 2016: 75). Dance is adamant that although placing writing behind multimedia in the sequence of production was the lynchpin of the project’s success, no single medium predominated in driving the narrative. His point runs counter to many fears of language decay in the digital ecosystem, as noted by Baym (2015: 72). The piece, he argues convincingly, is not primarily text, just as it is “not primarily anything” but an integration of “12 interactives, 18 videos and 4000 words and none of them work without the rest of them,” given the holistic interdependence of each part to the total reading experience (quoted in Hernandez and Rue 2016: 75).

The *Guardian* ironically upheld the journalistic code of “story first” (Lassila-Merisalo 2014) precisely by leaving writing last. On the surface, the project would appear yet another example of “language decay” in the digital age, the process by which digital communication technologies appear to be displacing the written word. Baron (2008) has argued that transformations in language use in the online world have raised fears of eroding writing standards due to the perception that users rarely dwell on the written word. Although computers have hastened the writing process, Baron (2008) maintains that the digital environment has not actually eroded language usage because nonstandard uses are mostly adaptations to technological affordances and social contexts, which “at most is a very minor dialectical variation” (163). The discourse of fear, language decay, and shortening attention spans nonetheless persists in depictions of electronic messages on new media as vacuous (Baym 2015: 35). Such consternation regarding shortening attention spans, however, is largely a means of “managing anxiety over social and technological change,” as Newman (2010) points out. The discourse regarding new media and shortening attention spans, furthermore, “reasserts the superiority of adult culture (longer-form, more contemplative) over youth culture (faster-paced, more distracting) and of a traditional establishment culture (print culture, the culture of educational institutions) over a threatening emergent culture,” particularly “electronic visual culture” now realized more than ever on the internet (Newman 2010: 593).

This binary pattern, however, predates advances in digital longform design that have brought the written word into prominence in digital spaces developed specifically to enhance their power. Marshall McLuhan habitually saw electronic media during the mid-twentieth century as mutually exclusive to the print and the written word, setting the context for understandings of longform journalism as anathema to the visual aesthetic of television. In particular McLuhan (1976)

argued that “attention saturates very quickly on television and attention span is brief” in support of his understanding that television posed a direct threat to the culture of print media literacy. Today’s multimedia narratives designed to attract and sustain reader attention stand as evidence refuting understandings of the short attention span as an inevitable consequence of an accelerated media culture. Immersive digital longform narratives that built upon the multimodal template established by “Snow Fall” have been shown in recent studies to be appealing to Millennials (Marino 2016; Marino et al. 2016).

One of those interventions utilized eye-tracking technology to demonstrate that Millennials spend nearly the same amount of time on written text as video (Marino et al. 2016), a finding that radically undercuts previous eye-tracking studies by Poynter. The studies by Poynter, which found readers typically did not read the text of online news stories, seemed to reinforce fears of language decay and the erosion of the intellectual mind associated with deep reading. But their studies took place during the 2000s (2000, 2003, and 2007), when online news templates contained hyperlinks and banner/pop-up ads. These were highly distracting formats compared to the relatively ad-free cognitive containers of the most recent digital longform designs. Following a horizontal pattern, readers raced from headline to cutline to photo, caption, and finally to video, where they spent most of their time (Quinn 2007). Attention to the written body of the story was tracked only briefly down the left column, skipping the vast majority of the writing. Visual culture, according to these findings, appeared to be replacing written culture through accelerated digital technologies.

The written word now plays an integral role in multimedia features, not only as the diegetic narrative voice that sets the tone, but also as the voices of the subjects themselves. *New York Magazine*’s 2016 American Society of Magazine Editors (ASME) multimedia winner “One Block,” for example, showcases the words of its subjects transcribed verbatim from oral interviews. This cultural geography of the gentrification of an African American Brooklyn neighborhood provides a window into race relations since its depiction in Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing*. The narrative is told through the voices of the neighbors, whose stories appear in their own transcribed words with phrases linked to internally embedded charts, graphs, profiles, or links to other neighbors. Augmented by a timeline of the house’s history of owners, this collection of unmitigated testimonials pulls the reader directly into the experience of gentrification from the perspective of the original community members (Gibson et al. 2015). Within Hernandez and Rue’s (2016) taxonomy of digital news packages, the piece exhibits characteristics of both Comprehensive (informational explication known as the “explainer story” in industry parlance) and Immersive (powerful interactives and narrative transportation) multimedia journalism. Each neighbor’s story builds on the themes and concerns of the previous one, establishing a basis for a profound macro-economic analysis attentive to the social and cultural repercussions of the neighborhood’s gentrification.

Through the new hybrid medium of immersive digital longform, “One Block” (Figure 1.1) illustrates the complexity of the remediation of pre-digital communication forms through converged media technologies (Deuze 2006). In the story, face-to-face oral communication is retrieved, enabling an ancient medium to reassert itself in a world where digital media predominate. The web has long borrowed from television, film, photography, and print. But those forms, along with oral communication, now “blend and incorporate styles from conversations and writing with the stylistic and formal syntax of film, television, music videos, and photography” along with other genres and practices. Audiences literate in the “visual lexicon” of Instagram, which characterizes communication on social media platforms, now combine that literacy with older forms (Alper 2014). Telepresence, defined as “the perceptual illusion of nonmediation” (Lombard and Ditton 1997), supports the claim that, compared to the written word alone, images—whether still or animated—“can feel more real than text” (Van House 2011: 131). When the image works in concert with the written word, telepresence takes on entirely new meaning. With unprecedented power to evoke greater depth of meaning both within and beyond the images they accompany, written text in multimedia features has become the digital analogue of medieval illuminated manuscripts and the painted lyrics of William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience*.

As with these texts, even language without the accompaniment of produced images has had a deep affiliation with visual reality. Indeed, the late-eighteenth-century periodical press gave rise to the sketch as a genre that became popular in literary miscellanies in England, and later in the USA through figures such as Washington Irving, famous for his fictionalized version of the form titled *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* The literary sketch was practiced by travelers as a way of capturing their impressions of scenes through ekphrasis, a process of generating images through highly visual linguistic description.



**FIGURE 1.1** “One Block,” *New York Magazine*, 2015

Ekphrasis lent itself well to the literary miscellany, precisely because it provided visual sketches to augment verbal ones in an early multimodal narrative method weaving writing with visual art (Enyedi 2016).

In the twentieth century, storytelling could proceed without the word in narrative masterpieces such as *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Walker Evans's photo essay of dust bowl migrants. Although Evans's haunting portraits of a gritty family of survivors can function independent of the written text, James Agee's commentary on the images captures the complex dialectic between word and image in nonfictional narrative. Crucially, Agee's written text aims to unlock the images from discursive categorization: "We are trying to deal with our subject not as journalists, sociologists, politicians, entertainers, humanitarians, priests, or artists, but seriously," especially in service of capturing "the direct emotion, experience, and thought" of each (Agee and Evans 2001: 10; Lehtimaki 2010: 190–191). Later in the twentieth century, experimentation in film's narrative power totally free of spoken or written language is epitomized by the achievement of *Koyaanisqasti* (Native American for "Life out of Balance"), a profound meditation on the clash between mechanized society and the natural world. When asked why the film features only Philip Glass's soundtrack to the exclusion of any dialogue, director Godfrey Reggio explained in 1982, "It is not for lack of love of language" that it has no words, but because "our language is in a state of vast humiliation" that "no longer describes the world in which we live" (Carson 2002). One can only imagine Reggio's virtuoso visual storytelling in today's immersive embedded multimedia formats in which language now plays a vital new role. In the hands of masterful documentarians such as the National Film Board Interactive's Katerina Cizek, language is creatively deployed in rhyming voice-over narration for her 2013 "A Short History of the High Rise," inspired by children's pop-up books. Piano accompanies the singsong verse of the narrative, delivering this apocalyptic nursery rhyme on the sobering costs of the development of the skyscraper, one of our most ubiquitous tokens of modern civilization.

This history of vacillation between language and the visual image in narrative media raises important implications for the future of journalism, not all of them dire. Indeed, with the written word playing a new and different role to amplify, expand, connect, and extend multimedia elements in online pieces, the question of its relative value arises, especially as it would appear to be in a losing battle for reader attention with immersive media armed with the power of telepresence. Yet the written word, according to the theory of media convergence, is not diluted in works like "One Block," nor is it overlooked as in early web template designs. In addition to the aforementioned eye-tracking studies that now demonstrate users are actually reading in a sustained manner online (Marino et al. 2016; Marino 2016), digital longform aggregators such as *Longreads* and *Longform* have bloomed into full-blown communities of online reading aficionados. Immersive non-distracting design has given rise to fresh uses of old media blending the written word in online forms in which "multimodality is

the method not only of representation and storytelling, but of meta-semiotic reflection and critique” (Hallet 2014: 165).

Evidence abounds indicating that SMS platforms such as Twitter can drive offline reading of print through online reading groups such as #1book140, a topic taken up in further detail in a later chapter. Attentional focus, according to Ciccricco (2015), is not compromised by multimodal forms. What does compromise attentional focus for online readers is digital design templates that include a great deal of hyperlinks and advertisements inviting readers to leave the page. Multimedia narrative modeled after “Snow Fall,” however, does not have such “leaks.” The diversity of its multimedia elements might lead one to suspect that the reading environment may scatter rather than distill attention. This is not the case, as “amid the alarm of attentional breakdowns, contemporary cognitive science” has proven that there is no simple on-off switch for attention, but rather a series of types of attentional focus. Most offline activities in everyday life, from playing tennis, to preparing a meal, to writing an essay, “require engagement in different tasks that recruit a different part or parts of the brain in order to execute them.” In this sense, “the attention is always divided, and this is a biologically necessary state of affairs.” Multimedia narrative avoids overloading the executive decision-making portion of the brain precisely because of its immersive design in which one medium typically yields to the next in succession, or in some cases are simultaneously overlaid, as in textual explanations scrolling over cut scenes in the *Guardian’s* “Firestorm.” The primacy of narrative, or “story first,” in this sense is always already multimodal, yet in a manner that does not pose the reader in a struggle to “inhibit or override all other competing signals in favor of a prioritized one” (Ciccricco 2015: 71).

Telepresence through the image actually reinforces the power of the written word that Gabriel Dance emphasized was essential—despite being last—in the process of producing “NSA Files: Decoded” for the *Guardian*. The aim is to have the audience experience facts, to strip away the constraints of media convention to achieve greater intimacy and nearness to the subject, as in Agee’s description of Evans’s photos (Lehtimaki 2010). As such, the dialectic between word and image comments on the process of its own production because it highlights rather than hides the gaps between the text and the lived experience of its subjects. As media falls away the sense of being there increases. The materiality of visual media brings us traces of the real, whereas the written word engages in the mentality of an abstract sign system. Although creative techniques such as montage, framing, retouching, and digital manipulation “expose as constructed the sense of the photograph’s privileged relation to the real,” there persists an “almost automatic association of the photograph with the real, the authentic, and the referent proves difficult to break” (Horstkotte and Pedri 2008: 14). In the context of journalistic narrative, the image not only provides a dramatic sense of visceral nearness to the subject that heightens dramatic effect, but also carries an authenticating role vital to journalism’s core

principle of verification. In this sense, “both journalistic writing and photographic documentation share the same kind of referential complexity in their non-fictional truth-claiming function,” as Lehtimaki (2010: 199) points out.

The embedded GIFs, videos, and photos in the multimedia feature enables a uniquely powerful narrative opportunity drawn from what Barthes (1977) calls “a natural *being-there* of objects” whereby “nature seems spontaneously to produce the scene represented” (45). Herein lies the immersive quality of the multimedia narrative genre, yet one different from 360 VR or an IMAX film precisely in both the presence of written text and book-like sticky navigation bars allowing access to chapters or sections. The written word intellectualizes visual embedded elements, without which they become naturalized subjects. The written word in “NSA Files: Decoded” functions to enrich, stabilize, and connect the meanings of the piece’s many interview videos, providing precisely the explication that enables the reader to atomize the piece’s own process of production, particularly through the sequence of key figures accessed in the Snowden network. As an explanatory story in the category of the “Comprehensive” multimedia news package as defined by Hernandez and Rue (2016: 121), readers are invited behind breaking news headlines into the highly complex series of events surrounding the release and impact of NSA files.

In one important sense, works such as the *Guardian*’s “Firestorm,” *New York Magazine*’s “One Block,” and *Atavist*’s “Love for My Enemies” qualify Barthes’s observation regarding the paradox of media technology’s evolution: “The more technology develops the diffusion of information (and notably of images), the more it provides the means of masking the constructed meaning under the appearance of the given meaning,” he explains (Barthes 1977: 46). By immersing the reader in the historic Brooklyn neighborhood with an opening point-of-view shot simulating a drive down the street of the “One Block” that is the subject of the piece, the “constructed meaning” is all but invisible through the illusion of being there. The arrangement of the story takes the reader from door to door, literally, through cut-scenes of each neighbor opening their door and stepping onto their porch. These visual direct addresses to the audience then yield to even greater intimacy, because once “inside” the home, users discover text that may appear constructed by journalists. Yet this too is naturalized, as the words are those of the resident him/herself, transcribed in full and unadulterated by the journalistic or editorial intrusion (Gibson et al. 2015). But crucially, the “given meaning” of those artifacts is not rendered without the active participation and interaction of the user, unlike Barthes’s passive twentieth-century viewers of advertising and film.

The effect of “One Block” is to transform the reader into the reporter, entering him or her into the process of narrative construction from this assemblage of gathered data. This renders “endless ways to read the story,” without one being more accurate than another, in which “*you’re* the reporter poring over your notes and annotations.” The reader is thus positioned as “the

one who has to make a mental map of these characters' relationships to one another—and what they mean for this small pocket of New York City in the midst of great change" (Eck 2016). Prescribed narrative now yields to this even more open-ended storytelling form, which immerses the reader in primary source evidence with totally autonomous navigation. Diegetic narration is thus ostensibly absent, yet everywhere present in the tacit connections the reader can discern between artifacts such as oral transcripts and charts depicting the social ramifications of the neighborhood's profound economic transformation. Like an Eisenstein (2010) montage, no transitions are explicitly supplied given the careful juxtaposition of shots to evoke specific associations. Similarly, the reportorial evidence of "One Block" is strategically embedded to reward immersive autonomous exploration of this rich repository.

The community's collective narrative in "One Block" is bound up in socio-economic circumstance. The backstory behind each resident's narrative of their life on the block emerges through internal links to data visualizations, photos, and graphics a meditation on their socio-cultural pasts and precarious economic futures in light of the immanent encroachment of affluent whites seeking real estate in Brooklyn, as signs of its increasingly fashionable status among urban elites. Undergirded with such data—detailing the rise of prices for local goods and services, the numbers of residents forced to move by year, the rapidly changing racial profile of the block—the transcribed verbal testimony in effect deconstructs the given, and thus naturalized, quality of the external images the reader first experiences through immersive point-of-view video (Gibson et al. 2015). The identity of the neighborhood, the reader learns, is not the solid set of row houses it appeared to be, but instead is revealed to be radically unstable and highly contested as gentrification overwhelms and uproots its original longstanding social and ethnic culture. Barthes's (1977) formula thus requires updating, given the new power of multimedia storytelling to make the illusory immersive quality of telepresence (that makes the constructedness of the content all but vanish) work not against, but in concert with the deliberate exposure of the journalistic process of production, especially through its dependence on large raw data sets to construct meaning.

## Binge Reading

The design of "One Block" emphasizes intimacy with the subjects, but not at the expense of an astute and meticulously researched macro-economic argument that has profound implications for urban development's impact on the racial profile of original local communities. One is tempted to go next door in the digital space of the story and visit another resident to learn of their unique, yet deeply shared, past and future life on the block. The stories are linked, precisely because the neighbors' lives have organically intertwined for decades. The cut scenes of each homeowner opening their door invites the reader in and

encourages continuous exploration of the community. The metaphor of visiting neighbors from house to house as a means of delving into their narratives serializes the experience into sections or chapters. In this sense, the organization of “One Block” echoes digital on-demand television’s format conducive to binge watching (Mittell 2015; García-Martínez 2016). As with re-cap openings in television series, each chapter/house of “One Block” can stand alone for individual consumption but is more likely to be viewed in conjunction with others in the series. Each denizen’s narrative, along with embedded multimedia features, is rendered in a size compact enough for sharing on social media.

A testament to the power of digital longform journalism lies in its versatility to range from a single-scroll multimedia documentary consisting of only one chapter such as “Love for My Enemies” to a 40,000-word seven-part epic such as “The Mastermind.” Both pieces, interestingly, are *Atavist* publications, the former offering a “spare weave of film and prose,” as one admirer tweeted, utilizing a nearly even balance of the two media in roughly 1000 words. A hybrid of documentary film storytelling and magazine feature writing designed for digital consumption, “Love for my Enemies” centers on the process of reconciliation of two survivors with their oppressors from the 1994 Rwandan genocide, one whose face was mutilated and was left for dead, and another whose infant was killed with a machete while in her arms. Its spare style is ideally suited to its resonant spiritual and psychological implications that evoke political humanitarian concern on a global level through this extraordinary act of forgiveness. The piece by German documentarian Lukas Augustin and writer Niklas Schenk is a finely crafted blend of interview footage, text, maps, and interactive profiles whose meaning is evocative in the manner of an allegorical parable, a technique built on implication rather than the exhaustive explication marking the Comprehensive classification of multimedia news packages (Hernandez and Rue 2016: 121).

In contrast to the spare visual poetry and suggestive brevity of the highly cinematic “Love for My Enemies,” which was produced with funds from the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting, “The Mastermind” operates on an epic scale. Bearing the characteristics of the true crime genre recently popularized through digital on-demand series such as *Making a Murderer*, “It is 40,000 words and you can read most of it in a morning,” the interviewer of author Evan Ratliff confessed on a podcast discussing the seven-part story on *Longform*. “I will attest it was ‘binge reading,’ exactly like when you cue up a new show on Netflix,” he said, a point anticipating the piece’s eventual purchase by the Russo Brothers (producers of the film *Captain America: Winter Soldier*) (Ratliff 2016a). The Russo Brothers, who have emerged recently among Hollywood’s most powerful filmmakers, preemptively purchased the rights to reproduce “The Mastermind” as a digital on-demand television series in pursuit of the expanding market share of the true crime genre established by *Making a Murderer* and Dan Zupansky’s *True Murder* podcasts. They have since struck a deal with FX to

launch the project (Busch 2017). *Longform's* interview of Ratliff, who regularly serves as a co-host on the platform's podcast series, opens with his humorous confession of "self-promotion, insider baseball, conflict of interest," which is not a cavalier disregard for ethics, but a full disclosure of interests and alliances suggesting the piece's function as sponsored content (Ratliff 2016a). The disclosure of interests in this case is revealing of the binge reading comment, one likely included to whet the audience's appetite for "The Mastermind" (Figure 1.2) as a digital on-demand television series on Netflix or similar platform.

In addition to *Atavist's* digital publishing software kits and training service, Ratliff's transmedial franchizing of his platform's products in book form (a print anthology of the digital magazine's best multimedia pieces appeared under the title *Love and Ruin*) and now for digital on-demand television is suggestive of the new opportunities in the expanding market for narrative journalism. The method of reporting also reaches across media, inviting online audience interaction. Some interviews for "The Mastermind," for example, did not occur until after two episodes were published in order to draw attention to the process of production and solicit reader suggestions for key interview sources and other data. Ratliff's model was *Serial*, the NPR podcast whose listeners similarly leveraged social media to contribute key data to support its reportorial process. Ratliff's subject is Paul Le Roux, author of *Encryption for the Masses* and E4M, an open-source free Windows disk encryption software program. Born an orphan in Bulawayo, Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, Le Roux avoided the death penalty despite setting up at least seven murders, and would eventually sign a proffer of immunity in exchange for pleading guilty to two charges the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) obtained through their sting operation. He



**FIGURE 1.2** "The Mastermind," *The Atavist Magazine*, 2016

directly led eleven into DEA stings, and another seven indirectly. The DEA had likely brokered a deal by which to release him from murder charges in order to use him as an informant to attempt to wipe out his larger network (Ratliff 2016b).

Le Roux started online pharmacy and gambling companies, which were all brilliant in their construction. At one point he had a militia in Somalia, which he intended to use to invade the Maldives (a tiny island nation 2000 miles east of Somalia in Africa) and to install a dictator so he could have a safe haven to run his giant online crime syndicate, which trafficked in pharmaceuticals, logs, gold, and arms. One of his more notorious schemes was to murder a former DEA agent as one of his stings. His hitman, Joseph Rambo Hunter, was arrested in 2013 in a DEA murder sting operation, wearing a Homer Simpson t-shirt. For Ratliff, his initial reporting was often a “late night internet thing” with “an infinite amount of research that could be done without ever talking to anyone” from Hong Kong court files to tracking his shell companies and drilling down on the backgrounds of the people listed on their Boards of Directors. Eventually, the reporting demanded flights to the Philippines and Israel for interviews (Ratliff 2016a).

Whereas Le Roux himself was unavailable since he is serving a twenty-five-year sentence, several of the roughly 1000 people who worked for him were eager to reveal their stories in person to Ratliff. In this case, the reporter’s risk lay in dedicating a major portion of his life to a story about a figure who routinely arranges for the murders of people who expose him. Ratliff (2016a) thus used neutral sites such as Starbucks for meeting places with individuals he tracked down on LinkedIn. Much of his reporting was absurdly easy, as he was surprised by how many people listed criminal organizations on LinkedIn (which he later advised them to remove). These individuals provided pseudonyms for the story, however, and communicated through encrypted emails, many telling Ratliff, “my safety is in your hands” and “don’t burn me.” The fate of Dave Smith, murdered for siphoning off the gold he was charged with trafficking, was the sort informants feared, as conflicting stories on the circumstances of his death all pointed to Le Roux’s notoriously swift retribution (Ratliff 2016a).

“The Mastermind” is a complex narrative involving extraordinary layers of detail, characters, and subplots, especially since Le Roux’s network was so vast. The narrative divides itself neatly between Le Roux’s early flirtation with crime via his online pharmaceutical scheme, a middle stage where his criminal dealings escalate to his improbable—and megalomaniacal—plan to take over Maldives (a plot whose intricacies rival those of a Russian novel) (Ratliff 2016b). Ratliff’s concern was to “protect his informants” while maintaining the truth claim of the piece as legitimate journalism, which posed a dilemma: “If you make it seem too anonymous, it’ll seem like you’re making it up” (Ratliff 2016a).

More than another installation in the “true crime” genre, “The Mastermind” details one of the largest and least-reported organized crime syndicates of the twenty-first century. Ratliff’s decision to publish a story of this magnitude as a

multimedia narrative online suggests the reach and influence of this digital genre. As the magnum opus of one of the pioneers of online longform storytelling, the piece's production process reflects a colossal, almost Melvillian scale of ambition. Ratliff wrote seven five-to-eight-thousand-word stories over the span of two months, at one point generating 4500 words in a white heat on one particularly prolific day (Ratliff 2016a). The over-arching narrative structure developed in advance focuses first on the building of Le Roux's empire then turns to his intermediaries before the denouement. Each episode works up to 2012, figure by figure, ultimately leading to Le Roux's arrest (Ratliff 2016b).

Whereas "Love for My Enemies" interweaves the quest for reconciliation of two genocide survivors in one unified single-scroll section, "The Mastermind" operates on a much larger scale, offering a complex web of narrative strands that harkens to the Russian novel tradition of works such as Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. Multi-strand narratives are common in novels, and increasingly popular in digital on-demand television series such as *Lost* and, more recently, *Arrow*, but are relatively new to nonfiction storytelling. They trace several long-term chains of events involving disparate groups and far-flung locations that run parallel to each other and frequently intersect. Ratliff's "not strictly chronological" (Ratliff 2016a) storytelling resembles a technique media scholars recognize as "simultaneous narrative" (Keen 2015: 100). "Employment of anachrony indicates the use of disorderly (anachronous) narration," according to Keen's (2015) definition, and can include "a whole range of devices from flashbacks to flash-forwards and extreme disordering that resists re-constitution into a straight-ahead plot" (100).

In conjunction with this complex narrative structure is the form's disclosure to the reader of the process of production. This direct address to the reader, Ratliff says, "was a huge step to say 'there are some things I couldn't verify, but I'm choosing to trust them.'" Working with his editors and digital designers, he recalled "In some cases we decided to say to the reader, 'we chose to trust this person because he gave me documented evidence of copies of fake passports, birth certificates, Paul Le Roux's real birth certificate.'" Whereas "fidelity to the truth" was paramount, the production team agreed to include in the text "acknowledgement that the facts are often not easily obtainable." Ratliff explained the implications for precisely the self-reflexive journalistic style that I argue is an emerging feature recognizable in serious multimedia nonfiction narrative.

Maybe that leads to more of a first-person, long-winded version of it to say "I found this here, I found this for this person" but the point of that is to make it explicit, relatively as transparent as you can make it.

(Ratliff 2016a)

The reporter's subjectivity clearly enters the piece and thus the process of reporting and production is revealed to the reader. To be immersed in journalistic multimedia storytelling is to be not only aware of, but in some cases, participate

in the reportorial process, in effect contributing to the means of narrative transportation by mending the seams of a seamless parallel universe. The reader's immersion is less escapist fantasy than real-world challenge to navigate real events—and their deeper core of truth—alongside producers who themselves are immersed. The following chapter turns our attention to the intense online dialogue, and its potent capacity to form online communities, that audiences seek after immersing themselves in longform narrative of social and political consequence.

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# 2

## SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE ONLINE READING REVIVAL

Following Apple's release of the iPad in 2010, demand for immersive longform storytelling skyrocketed throughout the internet, particularly on platforms such as *Longform* and *Longreads*. Soon after, in 2011, *Atavist* and *Byliner* spawned a host of vibrant online reading communities. The collaborative mass movement seeking longer, more textured writing rose in direct opposition to the shrinking attention spans associated with the digital revolution that have threatened to diminish, if not utterly annihilate, the status of narrative as the transmitter of core values shared and contested in the culture. Ironically, this crusade to carve out a space for absorbing narrative within the distracting ecosystem of the internet not only adopted the very medium blamed for its demise, it did so with a robust "chaos of connections, a blizzard of studied silence, a whirling vortex of intense, collective focus" (Konstantinou 2012). Testifying to the rich diversity of digital culture and its ubiquitous reach, social media provided both the setting and tools for the counter-revolution to reclaim narrative from "the marketplace of attention" and the commercial distractions of its infrastructure, from Google searches to social media (Webster 2016). In 2002, members of reading communities numbered roughly 50,000 in the United Kingdom and 500,000 in the USA; fifteen years later, with the proliferation of online discussion groups, the total expanded tenfold to an estimated 500,000 in the UK and 5 million in the USA (Ross 2018: 208).

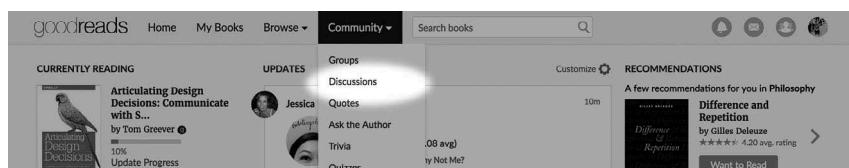
The digital revolution's marginalization of print books was signaled by the rapid decline since 2002 in all forms of print reading and the attendant rise of online reading, according to a 2012 Pew study (Kohut 2012). The shift away from print has suggested for some critics the loss of the literary mind associated with it, as deep immersive reading would appear to have yielded to highly distracting hyperlinked e-book alternatives and increasingly superficial online

reading. But deep reading and online reading are not mutually exclusive pursuits; the internet provides fertile ground for critical immersion in a wide variety of media texts. Surging demand for those digital texts is buoying rather than sinking the publishing industry, as sales rose to 23% of book publishers' revenue in 2012 for a 6% gain, reaching \$7.1 billion in revenue that year (Boynton 2013: 129).

This chapter argues that speed and access to rich stores of data characteristic of digital reading do not signal the inevitable decline and extinction of serious reflective reading. Indeed, the latest wave of online reading communities has harnessed hypersocial participatory internet culture for sustained focus on long immersive works. Whereas digital reading has been previously criticized for the haste and superficiality it encourages, the movement toward deep reading has given rise to a new premium on engagement, a measure based on how much time a reader spends with a digital text. Platforms such as *Longform* operate according to this model. In 2012, for example, 65% of *Longform* readers completed every 2000-plus-word story they read (Boynton 2013: 130). Among the diverse reading communities now populating the digital ecosystem, *longform*'s young mobile and well-educated readers represent a demographic Robert S. Boynton (2013) has called "the envy of any advertiser," as 50% are under 34, 30% read mainly on phones and tablets, and 42% have attended graduate school (130). The ascent of online reading communities is not without its tensions, sparking a series of critical debates discussed in the next section. It is followed by consideration of aggregators and their gatekeeping function in the digital publishing industry. Attention then turns to the individual reading experience and digital design's development toward immersive formats aimed at diminishing distraction. The final two sections are dedicated to ethnographies of reader interaction in online communities on web forums including *Goodreads* (Figure 2.1) and social media threads such as #1book140, hosted by *The Atlantic* and Jeff Howe.

## Reading in the Digital Age: The Critical Debate

If Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* stands as one of the literary world's great monuments to narrative achievement, the *Moby-Dick* Marathon Reading



**FIGURE 2.1** Goodreads, 2018

became a major occasion in popular literary culture to safeguard that achievement along with its print and oratorical origins from the distractions of the digital age. The annual New Bedford, Massachusetts live non-stop relay reading of Melville's novel functioned in 2009 as a "sit-in protest" against electronic media saturation, according to Mayor Scott Lange. Although Lange accurately predicted that "You won't hear or see a cell phone," 2009 would actually be the last anti-tech year for the reading, which then transformed from a tacit luddite rite to a full-blown technological feast, complete with giant screens displaying texts, tweets, and forum posts from virtual participants throughout the world discussing live streaming video of readers delivering passages of Melville's epic narrative (Dowling 2010: 38). In only one year—from 2009 to 2010—the event went from print-only to a multimedia extravaganza that ironically sacrificed nothing of its original intention: to reaffirm the power of complex narrative and the sanctity of the reader's full immersion in it. Once digital, the novel's global reach expanded the reading community of an event previously limited to its live participants and reported by a few bloggers and local reporters. That reading community has since grown with the proliferation of social media channels in each successive year. Fear of technology's stultifying effects in 2009 proved moot in 2010, as the novel would build new significance through its widening readership.

The spread of live Melville readings online is just one of many examples of the deep reading renaissance now taking place in digital culture. The now thoroughly digitized literary marathon readings reveal how online communities have seized the tools of social media for deep reading, effectively refuting skeptics such as Nicholas Carr (2011) and Jessica Helfand and John Maeda (2001), who insist that new media necessarily have a deleterious effect on narrative. But old media do not die; they converge, according to Henry Jenkins (2006). In his recent study of Melville in participatory digital culture, Jenkins points out that "it is simplistic to assume that technologies can support only one mindset" associated with scanning and skimming. It is also "wrong-headed to assume the Internet's intellectual ethic is in direct and total opposition to that associated with books" because, as the history of media suggests, "one medium does not displace another, but rather, each adds a new cultural layer, supporting more diverse ways of communicating, thinking, feeling, and creating than existed before" (Jenkins 2013: 11). Convergence culture, therefore, is at the core of the latest online movement for deep reading, as it embodies media merging together in an ongoing process at the intersection of technologies, industries, content, and audiences (Jenkins 2006: 13). Indeed, the online movement in deep reading illustrates precisely how communities can respond to the disruption of an old pattern of consumption—the solitary reading of print—by establishing new participatory cultures across media platforms.

The debate over the fate of deep reading in digital culture has drawn considerable attention. The January 2013 issue of the *Publication of the Modern*

*Language Association*, for example, dedicated its department of “The Changing Profession” to research on “Reading in the Digital Age.” In it, one study concluded that online reading “privileges locating information over deciphering and analyzing more complex text,” necessarily making “deep and sustained reading (for work or pleasure) run second to information gathering and short-term distraction” (Baron 2013: 200). Yet such arguments, as Jim Collins notes, “remain an exercise in nostalgia, grounded in a discourse of inevitable loss.” The hypersocialization of online readers, I concur, is not “merely a distraction” but “an entryway into an endless variety of reading communities,” a point made stronger in light of how they engage in archiving, sharing, and discussing texts, all edifying behaviors that cultivate both individuality and community (Collins 2013: 212). Digital publications now serve these communities in a richer variety than ever, wielding stunning new repertoires of multimedia storytelling.

Within the wider public debate on the impact of the digital revolution, deep reading’s fate plays a central role in several highly visible works expressing dissent toward online culture (Bauerlein 2008; Lanier 2010; Carr 2011; Turkle 2011; Harkaway 2012). The virulent effects of internet culture on news media, cognitive function, privacy, retail, and democracy have been cause for alarm from a variety of sectors (Jeong and Fishbein 2007; Levy 2007; Nass 2009; Dretzin 2010; Long Form 2011). Others have defended the democratic (Gillmor 2006; Shirky 2009), cognitive (Johnson 2006), and commercial benefits (Howe 2009; Briggs 2011) of electronic media. Luddite arguments lament the loss of human idiosyncrasy, intimacy, and sympathy though the marginalization of print as witnessed by the disappearance of brick-and-mortar bookstores, particularly independent ones, seemingly rendered obsolete by mammoth online superstores such as Amazon (Miller 2007). Utopians instead extol the virtue of the new avenues for group formation (Shirky 2009) and participatory culture (Jenkins 2006) that have opened up on the internet. According to actor-network theory (Latour 2011), it is less important to focus on “the relationship between virtual communities and the real world,” as internet studies did in the 1990s, than how “digital networks have instead rendered the real world more visible, as complex social networks that combine people and machines” (Flew 2014: 55).

Online reading communities represent a distinct shift in group reading from the private to the public sphere, a change that has become more pronounced with the proliferation of digital spaces designed for reading and discussion from the 1990s to the present. Prior to the internet, “most group reading activity happened in the private sphere, was invisible to outsiders, left few physical traces, and remained under the radar.” Now, “shared reading advertises itself,” particularly through the online marketing and promotional efforts of publishers, bookstores, and libraries (Ross 2018: 208). If the civic fabric of society had once been threatened by reclusive individualistic behaviors in the second half of the twentieth century, as Robert Putnam (2001) warned in *Bowling Alone*, it has made a distinct resurgence online through the public and social rebirth of

reading, perhaps the most private and solitary of human pastimes. *Narratively*, *Catapult*, *Granta*, *Guernica*, *The Rumpus*, *Longreads*, and *Tin House* now represent the leading edge of digital platforms featuring sophisticated content that encourages online discussion.

Unlike Stanley Fish's pre-internet concept of reading in "interpretive communities" as highly susceptible to top-down management and regulation, online readers have more freedom in their practice. Henry Jenkins et al.'s (2016) concept of affinity spaces describes such tolerance in digital sites dedicated to inclusive participation—from reading to photography to fan fiction and knitting—for mutual learning fostered across traditional social divisions of race, class, gender, and age. Jenkins et al. (2016) observe that "diversity is a central value within a knowledge community" because "the more diverse the contributions, the richer the solutions the community will develop around common problems and concerns" (30). The result is "the development of individual expertise" through the pursuit of personal passions while maintaining community, socialization, and diversity through shared goals and the development of an ethical framework (Jenkins et al. 2016: 30).

Although discussions on website forums and social media generated by *Booklist*, *Goodreads*, and *Longreads* certainly engage in canon formation and taste-making via best-of annual lists, those lists undergo rigorous scrutiny by community members. The curating of recommended or highly touted material on *Longreads* is hardly accepted without comment. Like online news, digital reading forums dedicated to the discussion of immersive longform narrative leaves a trail of reader comments and exchanges. "In a digital environment, yesterday's news no longer (only) stockpiles as paper waste or clippings in scrapbooks," according to Bodker 2017: 59). Instead, it "accumulates in dispersed digital and traceable layers—incorporated into or accompanying new texts" (Bodker 2017: 59). Both print and online texts now have their own reading histories that are traceable on platforms such as *Goodreads* and *Reddit*. In those spaces, readers enjoy "greater potential for more personalized media environments and the enabling of group interaction around media through online social networks" (Flew 2014: 76). In addition, barriers for entry into online discourse communities are low compared to those of the pre-digital era.

Since online reading communities establish how their own "collective and institutional processes shape reading practices that authoritatively define what is worth reading and how to read it," they do so in a more deliberative, democratic, and transparent way than pre-digital institutionally run groups (Long 1993). Although a more egalitarian forum of exchange and debate determines tastes and preferences for digital longform journalism than allowed by the top-down process of print publication—a system adjudicated exclusively by editors and publishers—the digital sphere is certainly not immune to its own forms of corruption in the gatekeeping process. New media may encourage but do not determine uses and effects. As Flew (2014) points out, "new technologies are enabling rather than

causal” (53). At their best, digital networks “render the real world more visible” (Flew 2014: 55). At their worst, they distort and misrepresent it.

The vogue of digital longform, for example, was subject to serious criticism, some just and some misguided. Josh Roiland (2018) noted that longform journalism “has experienced an extended renaissance over the last decade and, with it, numerous conversations about its conventions and controversies” (185). The most conspicuous of those controversies was the problematic appropriation of “longform” as a signifier of quality, as Jonathan Mahler argued in “When ‘Long-Form’ is Bad Form” in *The New York Times*. Others, such as George Packer, lamented *Grantland’s* (ESPN’s former digital longform outlet, edited by Bill Simmons) gross exploitation of the identity of its trans-gender subject as an object of lurid fascination and masculinist locker-room ridicule in “Dr. V’s Magic Putter.” Readers revolted on social media. Quality, the argument went, was compromised while cloaked beneath the mantle of literary prestige associated with longform.

Whereas the argument rang true in glaring cases such as *Grantland’s*, much of the online discourse on the subject tended to be “shortsighted and ahistorical,” particularly in its disdain for “the indulgent narrative voice” without regard to the progressive political impact of its use by the New Journalists (as in Hunter S. Thompson’s coverage of campaigns by Richard Nixon and George McGovern) and environmental activists such as Rachel Carson (Roiland 2018: 185). Yet it is important to note that this backlash occurred not because users wished to return to the shallow digital news templates of the early 2000s and their ad-laden click-heavy customs. Instead they expected journalistic integrity and did not hesitate to leverage social media to criticize works failing to earn the prestige associated with longform. At a deeper level, audiences in this case showed a clear expectation for interaction with digital longform, reacting to and understanding it as interactive media. As Deuze explains,

people not only have come to expect participation from media [but] they increasingly have found ways to enact this participation in the multiple ways they use and make media ... The internet can be seen as an amplifier of this trend.

(2006: 68)

## Aggregation in the Digital Publishing Industry

Established digital publishers face the challenge of cultivating audiences who expect participation and interactivity from their media. New entrants in the industry face even greater difficulty in attracting an audience when “readers are becoming ever more stateless, devoted to great storytelling, less so to a certain publication,” as *The Big Roundtable* publisher Anna Hiatt observed (Shapiro et al.

2015: 180). The problem has compounded itself since “link farms” such as *Longreads* and *Longform*, who operate as “referrers,” have become “engines with taste and sensibility” highly respected by readers, but whose selection criteria can work against startups. Since its June 2013 launch, for example, *The Big Roundtable* has struggled to have its stories featured by these coveted aggregators. Hiatt explained, “In the beginning of the longform revival,” the role of “the kid re-hawking discarded newspapers” transferred to social media on Facebook pages, Twitter streams, and such specialized and increasingly influential distribution engines (Shapiro et al. 2015: 179–180).

As “the two dominant curators in this space,” *Longreads* and *Longform* “are run by white men in their thirties who are married and live in urban areas,” Hiatt revealed (Shapiro et al. 2015: 180). Their demographics shape their preferences, as “the identity of the decider makes a big difference in the pieces that he picks” (Shapiro et al. 2015: 180). Many “great stories get lost in the dark recesses of the internet” which are “not the fault of the story,” she explained (Shapiro et al. 2015: 180). These two gatekeepers, in her view, have monopolized the curating of digital longform, thus perpetuating “a flawed system, one that continues to operate if only because there is no other mechanism at the moment to reliably surface the best content” (Shapiro et al. 2015: 180). But the system has grown more complex. More than just a link farm, *Longreads* now produces its own original content, such as its series “Behind the Writing,” featuring topics such as the art of interviewing. Further, the mobile audience has become an increasingly important factor for startups to consider, especially in entering the elite list of journals featured on *Longform*’s app for iPad 1.1.5, which now includes *Narratively*, *Gizmodo*, *Grist*, *McSweeney’s*, *New Statesman*, *Polygon*, *Rookie*, *The Smart Set*, and the *Times Literary Supplement*. Hiatt’s concern in 2014 for cracking the *Longreads* code has been resolved in part by *Medium*’s partnership with her publication *Big Roundtable* in 2018, along with co-publishing contracts with *Buzzfeed*, *NOVA*, *Tablet Magazine*, and *Digg*.

*Longreads* is built on the promise of distraction-free online reading. In this sense the platform not only curates, but also cleanses digital longform content of distracting pop-ups and banner ads for members who pay at least \$50 annually in any increments they wish. Free content is otherwise offered on the site to nonmembers, but advertising remains in it. In this sense, the business model of *Longreads* is focused primarily on (re)packaging and distribution rather than producing original journalism. Its editors therefore draw on existing stories from other platforms and reformat the content for an ad-free, app-like immersive reading experience.

Prior to such innovations, the web would have appeared the least likely environment to host the revival of deep reading given the findings of several studies of online reading. A 2005 survey of the influence of hypertext on comprehension concluded that “the increased demands of decision-making and visual processing in hypertext impaired reading performance” unlike “traditional

linear presentation” (DeStefano and LeFevre 2007: 1639). Jakob Nielsen’s (2006) eye-tracking study of web users revealed that the eye follows a pattern resembling the letter F when reading text on websites compared to line-by-line reading encouraged by printed material. Nielsen’s (2008) further experiments found that web users actually read very little in the traditional linear sense, spending instead the majority of their time skimming webpages in haste. Such browsing was indicative of the desire to scan and absorb material quickly, a factor of speed concomitant to the distracting nature of digital culture’s new premium placed on “multitasking.” Research at Stanford University conducted by Clifford Nass (2009; Gorlick 2009) has contributed convincing scientific data supporting the cognitive losses incurred from multitasking compared to work performed without distraction. His lab’s findings have since been verified with alarming implications that suggest a profound blindness to otherwise obvious elements—“invisible gorillas,” as Chabris and Simons (2010) call them—in our environment when attention is divided. Nass’s (2009) concern for task switching, however, is less relevant to today’s new self-contained immersive designs where multimedia use coheres around an overarching narrative, as discussed later. Whereas the internet may have marginalized and neglected narrative in obvious ways, it also nonetheless provided the media for its revival, proving that computer-mediated communication (CMC) and short messaging service (SMS) are tools that can have either corrosive or revitalizing effects on the culture depending on their use (Harkaway 2012). Social media now provides both the mechanisms for distribution and discussion of digital longform stories.

## Absorbing Digital Design’s Cognitive Advantages

In pursuit of the new gold standard of reader engagement, publishers at the industry’s leading edge have leveraged new storytelling technologies for mobile audiences to capture and maintain their attention (Nelson and Webster 2016). The latest developments in digital longform now offer a reading experience calibrated to reduce reader distraction and distill focus on narrative. A “mix of trepidation and exuberance with regard to new technologies” attends this renaissance in nonfiction digital storytelling—today’s fastest-growing literary genre—as high-end productions function to build prestige, express brand values for their respective publishers, and, in the case of content marketing, corporate sponsors (Conboy and Eldridge 2016: 117).

Rather than losing readers the way “jumps” did in print newspapers by directing them to inside pages to continue stories, digital works like the *Guardian’s* “Firestorm” immerse them in the story world with sequenced visuals animated as they rise into view on the screen, in effect rewarding readers for advancing the linear narrative. Today’s multimedia narratives are built upon such absorbing templates, which render profoundly different reading experiences than the inherently distracting ones associated with the superannuated

jump in newspaper stories or the primitive digital design of Mark Bowden's 1996 web edition of *Black Hawk Down*. Now when readers encounter an image, video, or chart in stories like the *New York Times'* "Greenland is Melting Away," it is directly tied to the text on the previous screen not as mere ancillary decoration, but as a vital component of a carefully orchestrated symphony of verbal and visual communication modalities known as ekphrasis (Enyedi 2016).

The threat of digital media destroying deep reading and literary narrative given the increasing role of visuals in digital journalism has led some critics to fear "what is lost cognitively if the image dominates and reading abilities decline" (Hartsock 2016: 155). However, Mitchell et al.'s (2016) Pew study actually indicates that readers are spending more time on stories containing a greater number of words than their shorter counterparts, and that they access each with equal frequency. This means the majority of time reading on mobile phones has swung toward longform rather than the opposite. The finding, along with evidence of the rapid evolution of digital longform, underlines our need to dispel old notions of digital culture as a deterrent to reading written text. The rise of digital longform is one of many recent signs in online culture suggesting that reports of the death of literary culture have been greatly exaggerated, as in Loren Ghiglione's surrender of the written word to digital media. "Despite what we newspaper Neanderthals wish to believe about the majesty of print," he lamented, "the age of literate readers—readers of newspapers, serious literature, and books—is passing," having "fallen prey to television, computers, videos and Nintendo" (quoted in Underwood 2008: 191).

Reading practices on the converged media of digital longform should not be confused with the multitasking Clifford Nass (2009) proved in his Stanford labs to be deleterious to cognitive function. The lost train of thought in Nass's studies occurs during task switching specifically between two totally unrelated activities in different visual and cognitive environments such as texting and driving a car. The research carries fewer implications for in-app reading/watching of news than it does in disproving the assumption among many millennials that multitasking empowers them with greater efficiency and productivity, an issue that is now currently besieging classrooms as undergraduates insist on having laptops open during lectures. Nass (2009) was interested in how competing streams of electronic information compromised cognitive function, much less ones designed to compliment one another in building a single coherent narrative through-line. Juggling disparate tasks—the essence of multitasking—impaired the cognition of those attempting "to switch from one job to another in comparison to those who prefer to complete one task at a time" (Gorlick 2009; Nass 2009). There is no single narrative tying those tasks together the way there is between written text and multimedia elements in digital longform.

Tellingly, Nass's studies were all published in 2009, one year before the release of the iPad, and well before mobile news apps became widely used. In today's digital longform, "multimedia is at the heart of narrative structure" rather than simply a display of technological prowess, according to the most recent research

into the genre's multimodality (Hiippala 2016: 4). As such, it is immersive rather than distracting, as stories unfold by harnessing and combining the narrative powers of documentary cinema with the feature magazine. Text and video rise onto the screen, actively encouraging extended engagement, focus, and time on site. The variety of media in such stories, if carefully embedded, only functions to absorb the reader into the narrative. This new design is the fullest technological realization of ekphrasis in journalistic storytelling, converging written and visual media into new dimensions from its print origins in the example of James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and the narrative synergy it builds with the photographs by Walker Evans that accompany the text.

Recent research in digital longform journalism has reinforced how the genre is reworking existing media in new ways to elicit completely different, and decidedly more immersive, reactions from the audience. Multimodal theory, for example, offers valuable insight into how digital longform situates and sequences different modes of communication to captivate the audience. Specifically, digital longform must handle both time- and space-based organizational structures, according to Hiippala's (2016) findings (7). Video plays out in time, whereas spatial media such as still graphics, charts, and text exploit layout space. Jacobson et al. (2016) have demonstrated that both can combine to accentuate literary techniques found in traditional nonfiction narrative. Rather than taxing reader attention with competing messages that might demand task switching, digital longform instead builds on the means by which print and television journalists embed social and cultural meaning in their stories through visual and verbal messages that audiences interpret simultaneously. This process "can be understood through the notion of 'braiding,'" in which two or more media appear together to create combined meaning," thus enabling new modalities of storytelling (Jacobson et al. 2016: 530–531). Traditional media thus combine in new ways to build multimedia narratives beyond their early-2000s (pre-smartphone and tablet) existence as stories shoveled from print to the web, after which they were supplemented with slideshows, interactives, and videos.

The *New York Times'* "Greenland is Melting Away" features a streamlined design structure that directs and distills reader attention vertically down the page along a line rather than horizontally across the page, as in any major newspaper's landing page, where structure and organization of space into hierarchies prevails. As Hiippala (2016) observes, "whereas hard news is often organized into a clearly compartmentalized and segmented layout, longform journalism benefits from having the entire layout space available for use" (194). Such structure functions as a "cognitive container" (Dowling and Vogan 2015: 211), which holds the reader's attention through embedded multimedia elements rather than hyperlinks that send the reader out of text, and because it does not have to compete for users' attention with other editorial or advertising content on the page. Digital longform, furthermore, is not subject to constraints arising from news values dictating its position on the news organization's landing page (Hiippala 2016: 194).

The “mechanistic expository style of hard news stories,” as Le Masurier (2014) describes breaking news in contrast to the aesthetic of the Slow Journalism movement, is anathema to the distinctly creative aesthetic driving digital longform narrative (6). Digital longform works differently to exploit available semiotic modes and combine them in provocative and aesthetically meaningful sequences, all activated by scrolling—a movement previously reserved for interacting with a single screen—which triggers a variety of transitions between conjoined and contiguous screens (Hiippala 2016: 204). The genre is designed for sharing and discussing on social media, as evidenced by the frequent use of social web panels to encourage the posting of not only each story in its entirety, but its component parts, from its written paragraphs to its data visualizations, photos, and videos (Dowling and Vogan 2015). “The accessibility and shareability of [digital longform] stories bring about new possibilities for reaching readers and creating conversations,” according to Maria Lassila-Merisalo (2014: 10). These news products represent media hybridity for topics ranging from pressing contemporary issues of learned debate such as immigration and global warming to entertainment topics such as video gaming and sports. Most are treated in a sophisticated way that leverages multimedia elements to extend the “multireferential plane” (Lehman 1996: 36) while abiding by core journalistic principles such as “the reality boundary” (Sims 2009: 7).

Users are as captivated by text as video, according to an industry report by Marino et al. (2016) on eyetracking and digital longform, which found that total fixation was relatively even between the two. Yet of vital importance was their finding that participants expressed greater levels of enjoyment and satisfaction in the text and photography in several cases than they did in videos. Indeed, many were bored by videos they found were “too long,” attesting to Hiippala’s (2016) theory that longform prefers shallow formatted videos. Followed closely by text, well-edited photographs, by contrast, provoked the most specific comments indicating pleasure and satisfaction of all the multimedia elements. The *Guardian*’s “Firestorm” carried the greatest impact visually, as its photos and videos were seen as essential to the immersive eye-witness quality of the reportage. Readers of digital longform, according to their report, also preferred autonomous navigation, as they disliked the locked-in progression of chapters in “Rebuilding Haiti” (Marino et al. 2016). Their findings suggest that autonomous navigability, a vestige of print reading, and crisp editing of video and photographs hold sway with readers.

## The Digital Audience Evolves

Rising interest in digital longform reinforces recent findings indicating decreasing attention span is more myth than documented fact (Newman 2010; Marino et al. 2016; Neveu 2016). As Neveu argues,

if the readership of some magazines crumbles, it is not because long articles are beyond the reach of internet zombies, but because the supply of leisure and cultural activities is endlessly increasing, fragmenting audiences, as is the case for TV networks.

(2016: 83)

Even *BuzzFeed*, the platform most notorious for its “snackable” content, has entered the longform market with content that now competes with august platforms like the *Guardian*. With an average of 38,000 shares, *BuzzFeed*'s longform articles consistently perform better on social media than shorter pieces (Rayson 2015).

Such reflective journalism encourages online debate and civic dialogue through what Jerome McGann (1991) calls radial reading, a process of delving deeply within the text and re-surfacing to access supporting data to aid and enrich interpretation. During the print era, interaction with meta-data surrounding a text ranged from consulting a dictionary and other published reference material to consulting other readers of the text informally and/or through formal educational institutions and traditional book clubs. Prior to the internet, the highly mediated organization of reading communities carried greater transaction costs due to the inefficiencies of traditional media communication compared to the speed and efficiency of online group formation (Shirky 2009). Online data networks not only enable readers to assemble and reach one another faster than ever, they provide ample and readily accessible support for the reading of both digital and print texts.

“Emily Dickinson tells us that ‘there is no frigate like a book’ in order to remind us that reading sends us away from and within the books we enter” (McGann 1991: 113). Deep reading that sends us away from the text in order to burrow deeper into it, as McGann (1991) explains, is far more critically engaged than the escapist experience of Ray Bradbury’s Mildred Montag of *Fahrenheit 451*, for example, whose parasocial identification with the narrative she consumes supplants real interactions, leaving her in a perpetual state of passive captivity. The active social nature of online reading communities counters older tendencies toward isolation and passivity associated with solitary print reading. Longform storytelling in literary polyvalent texts is not only “linguistic and spatial, but multiple and interactive as well,” and hypertextual, just as the richest poetry and prose tend be (Redman 1997: 142). Such works demand explication and interrogation now easily accessible on the internet through the ready consultation with others willing to share their knowledge and expertise.

Internet culture has spawned this new form of immersive reading as witnessed in the heterogeneity of readership on such platforms as *BookTalk.org*, *LitLovers: A Well-Read Online Community*, and *onlinebookclub.org*. *Shelfari*, *LibraryThing*, and *Goodreads* emphasize archiving, connecting readers based on shared titles on their virtual bookshelves. *LibraryThing*'s forum system, *Talk*, enables

users to see conversations occurring in all groups or just their own. Discussion here can be intensely specialized, as in one thread about Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, which freely dovetailed into contemporary scientific books, as seen in the contribution of a reader called southernbooklady. In response to the assertion that "the genetic clock can be tracked to show the split between the two species ca. 3 million years ago," she references the contemporary book, *Spillover: Animal Infections and the Next Human Pandemic*, for its treatment of how "genetics are used to trace the evolution of not just pathogens, but the way pathogens become integrated into the lifecycle of hosts," particularly in "different strains of HIV," a pattern evocative of "the genetic history of various flu viruses," which she notes places evolution into proper perspective (*LibraryThing* 2014). Far from becoming untethered by unsupported assertions and doctrinaire soap-box rants one might expect from an online discussion of evolution, this discussion and others like it remain steeped in such useful data and allusions, all of which serve the purpose of illuminating the core meanings and contexts of the text at hand—in this case, Darwin. Talk on *LibraryThing* thus represents complex movement back and forth between the text, other texts, SMS with other readers (texting, tweeting, social networking, and emailing), and web searches. The key is that engaged critical readers truly immersed in the process will return to the text, rather than exiting into an endless series of distractions, one begetting the next, which the internet has been notorious for encouraging. Thus internet culture has extended the dialogic nature of critical reading. This revises Carr's binary expressed in his metaphor for deep reading as deep-sea diving and internet reading as frenetic jet skiing (2011: 7). The immersive radial reading of expressive texts dives deeper into subjects with tools of illumination retrieved at the surface rather than flitting mindlessly only on the surface, the very nature of *surfing*, according to more common internet reading practices.

In an online discussion of *Outlander* in #1book140—the official hashtag of 1book140's month-long meeting of readers who collectively choose a book to read from one announced genre—such radial reading was on display. Twitter, in this case, served as the medium through which to share a revealing link to a *Books and Writers Community* post, offering data on how the original marketing plan for the text impacted its genre, especially its use of conventions typically found in romances. Sandy's tweet, "Here's an explanation from @Writer\_DG on why Outlander was originally marketed as a romance," offered the link to data that, Melissa acknowledged, had enriched her reading experience: "Thanks for the info about Outlander. Didn't know much about it until I decided to do #1book140" (2014). The Twitter exchange was fruitful and indeed drove directly at the heart of what makes *Outlander* author Diana Gabaldon so interesting: her willingness to blend genres from historical fiction to mystery to science fiction to fantasy. This source of knowledge about the text enlightened the reader, while spreading the conversation to a separate but related online reading community. Elsewhere on #1book140, readers credit their community

for encouraging them for concentrating their attention. On 11 February 2014, jompoi, for example, tweeted that “#1book140 helps me learn 2 appreciate different genres, books’ merits and flaws,” thanking the reading community for helping to sustain his attention and interest. “I’ve completed every #1book140 selection, and will do so with this one as well,” he said, allowing that “otherwise I would have quit after 100 pages or so” (2014).

Such discussions reveal how reading communities can use the web to increase users’ intelligence through speed and efficiency without neglecting a more time-honored understanding of intelligence measured by depth of thought. Collaboration among *Outlander* readers places into proper perspective findings suggesting cognitive effects of the massive increase in internet use in the last decade include a decline in “deep processing” that underpins “mindful knowledge acquisition, inductive analysis, critical thinking, imagination, and reflection” (Greenfield 2009: 70). Such reading communities dispel fears that browsing, scanning, and skimming would eliminate the capacity to immerse oneself in a longer work of writing, and commit a level of concentration that exerts control over the text rather than succumbing to the whim of clicking on the next attractive hyperlink or banner advertisement. With each new media product, the internet will continue to spawn “new forms of ‘reading’ … as users ‘power browse’ horizontally through titles, contents pages and abstracts going for quick wins” in order to adapt to those new modalities (Liu 2005: 700–712). Such browsing and scanning can co-exist with deep reading and even enhance it, as the speed with which the reader’s shared link about *Outlander*’s genre conventions attests. Ironically, the culture of distraction in which newspaper sections like the *Boston Globe*’s “Short Takes” have become staples in most daily print and online formats has only encouraged readers to share such material through CMC and SMS to enrich their collective deep reading. The power of the internet to scatter attention becomes the very resource providing the tools for this counter-revolution.

## Online Social Reading as Mass Collaboration

#OccupyGaddis is a reading group whose stated purpose is to discuss William Gaddis’s *J.R.*,

a book about our fragmented attention and a book designed to tax our capacity to pay attention—to demand higher and deeper levels of attention from us—in a world imagined to be (both in 1975 and today) a kind of conspiracy to keep us from focusing on what is right in front of us.

(Konstantinou 2012)

The large online reading group recently assembled through Twitter and message boards to peruse Gaddis’s exceptionally difficult and complex novel. Lee Konstantinou (2012), the group’s founder, called the project #OccupyGaddis

invoking a spirit of protest against the fragmentation and alienation of digital culture. His project was inspired by the *New Yorker* article on Gaddis by Jonathan Franzen, “Mr. Difficult,” which alerted him to the unsalable yet brilliant 976-page narrative sprawl. Konstantinou’s hypothesis was that, confined to the medium of print and offline discussion, the novel’s value remained hidden from readers. They lacked what the internet would provide: access to each other and rich stores of data to gloss the text and unleash its full significance. Once the online public had dis-intermediated access to it, the success of the group would represent a form of protest against the most distracting reading environment in media history, ironically proving that digital ecosystem conducive to collective deep reading. Exhorting the readers, he wrote, “the great virtue of collective reading projects is that they give us occasion to work together to help us sustain our attention, to achieve goals we might have thought too difficult to attain working on our own” (Konstantinou 2012).

The inspiration to launch the project on the web came from the online reading of David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* by a group who called their undertaking of his unwieldy and profound novel from June through August of the year the author passed away, “Infinite Summer” (Coscarelli 2009). This movement’s taking place online and not live and in print suggests the compatibility of serious reading discussions with popular social media. Jim Collins (2010) asks why serious literary work should be understood as *competing* with the internet and popular entertainment. Konstantinou’s experiment illustrates precisely the interdependence of mass media and literary reading illuminating the “crucial associated tastes” conjoining “literary experiences … no longer restricted to the solitary act of reading a book” (Collins 2010: 17). “Infinite Summer,” which took place in the summer of 2009, has found a lively following, further indicating the type of interest in more sustained reading experiences than the internet typically offers, while also capitalizing on the networking capacity of social media.

When entering the “Infinite Summer” message board, one is immediately struck by a sense that reading passively for escapist entertainment is anathema to the objective of this online community, signified by the notice at the top of the screen in red: “There are NO spoiler restrictions in this forum” (Infinite Summer 2009). “Infinite Summer” readers were relieved of such concerns about spoiling the entertainment of the uninitiated, and thus could delve into the full scale of interconnected scene sequences and foreshadowing in *Infinite Jest*’s sophisticated narrative structure. Online Wallace readers were thus not only analytically inclined on the forum, their critical impulse had them thinking in terms of the book’s content within the context of its convergence across multiple media platforms. One of the 154 topics introduced by readers on the forum, for example, received forty-one replies to a post on “Movie Adaptations of *Infinite Jest*.” The critical discussion that ensued ranged from speculation about which directors could possibly pull off such a feat—David Lynch, Terry Gilliam, and the Cohen Brothers topped the list—in terms of the resonance of their aesthetic with

that of Wallace's, a concern problematized by the translation of his seemingly unfilmable and unwieldy narrative into a motion picture. One discussant noted, "Lynch seems to find his greatest pleasure and/or solace in rushing towards a certain extreme surrealism and individual obsession that DFW is trying to make sure [his characters] are NOT lost in," a point aptly linked Wallace's preference for characters who "find ways to reconnect/remain invested in community and personal connection" (*Infinite Summer* 2009).

The default behavior of "Infinite Summer" members is the facilitation of deeper understandings of Wallace's work and its broader significance. Discussion may be sprawling, but it touches base with keynotes from the text with regularity. Retyping passages for readers who do not have immediate access to the text is common practice. For example, one reader's request for "the text of the section where Himself reminisces about 'how [he] first became interested in annulation'" was met by another, Robbi60, who dutifully retyped the lengthy multi-paragraph excerpt and posted it immediately from Italy. Such facilitation of material simultaneously breaks down the isolating barriers of reading alone on print, and opens channels of discussion driven by a shared desire to engage critically with Wallace's novel.

The free flow between print and digital media in online book communities such as "Infinite Summer" illustrate Jeff Howe's assertion that "conventions, like the 'novel,' the 'book' and even the very act of reading are no more immutable than language itself" (2012). Not only is deep reading and the book thriving in our culture, the very engine driving their renaissance ironically is the web itself. "A book club that meets virtually on the Internet represents something wholly new in literary culture: reading as an act of mass collaboration" (Howe 2012). Since this statement was made in 2012, the explosion of virtual reading communities has made them a staple of literary culture that can hardly be understood any longer as wholly new (Ross 2018). To communicate one's thoughts on difficult and richly crafted works through a truncated medium like Twitter would appear to defeat the purpose. Yet Twitter is just one step in an elaborate transmedia chain in which "bookies"

copy passages off their iPads, Nooks and Kindles and then paste them into tweets before toggling back to their texts. They post longer comments to their Facebook accounts. They create Google maps that display the GPS coordinates of where individual members are reading.

(Howe 2012)

CMC and SMS typical of such reading groups embodies a "language and media ideology that emphasizes the fluidity and instability" of typographic expression (Soffer 2012: 1105). The wider cultural movement toward deep reading and longform texts paradoxically "is well-integrated in the postmodern trends that provide ideological justification for undermining rigid, modernist linguistic rules" (Soffer 2012: 1105).

A new appreciation for narrative has developed in response to the loss of sustained reading on the internet. Alexander Chee’s “I, Reader,” a 2010 personal essay in the *Morning News*, laments the deterioration of deep reading in our culture. He particularly regrets the moral detachment that comes of brief, quick-hitting news stories, which for him developed into a malaise of civic apathy. He finds a remedy for this moral conundrum of consuming news in vast quantities but so superficially and quickly as to inspire apathy rather than compassion and civic activism. Immersion in longer works made Chee (2010), as it does for many others now visible online, care again about the social consequences of the news. Susan Sontag has similarly found that “By presenting us with a limitless number of nonstop stories,” a symptom of their increasing brevity and superficiality,

the narratives that the media relate—the consumption of which has so dramatically cut into the time the educated public once devoted to reading—offer a lesson in amorality and detachment that is antithetical to the one embodied by the enterprise of the novel.

(Sontag 2007: 217)

The loss of immersion in narrative comes with the loss of morality.

## **Intellectual and Activist Culture in Digital Spaces**

The need to reclaim the conscientious moral sensibility deep reading encourages has been a source of motivation behind the movement for longer and more sophisticated material on the internet. Critics, however, have pointed out that some online reading forums such as *LibraryThing* emphasize competition and intense monitoring of status. Newman (2008), for example, argues that such networks encourage members to collect books as status symbols to the exclusion of discussing them. Functioning primarily as recommendation engines, these platforms “stress the book’s value as a commodity or collectible” neglecting its function as an object of collective intellectual inquiry and exploration (Newman 2008: 21).

But other findings (Sedo 2011) suggest more is at stake in these communities than curatorial one-upmanship rooted in materialistic acquisition. A growing number of networks such as *Goodreads*, for example, are dedicated to the edification of their users through in-depth exchanges about textual content and its ethical implications. In these networks “readers connect with each other regardless of factors such as cultural or socioeconomic background, gender, reading level, or geography” (Sedo 2011: 7) primarily to “search for meaning within a text, sort out power structures, and, ultimately, gain knowledge that comes from exposure to, and discussion of, new and unfamiliar concepts” (11). With its inclusive ethos and democratic structure, *Goodreads* is self-monitored, shares leadership among members, and accommodates both “lurkers” and explicitly

off-topic forums. Unlike Twitter, it is possible to make an exhaustive list of participants in these centralized forums, as “anything that happens on the list or in the discussion group is within the purview of that group” (Foasberg 2012: 35).

The search for and discussion of new and unfamiliar topics across a diverse spectrum of readers characterized the activity on a recent *Goodreads* forum held during the summer of 2018 on Andrea Wulf’s biography, *The Invention of Nature: Alexander von Humboldt’s New World*. In the forum, a user named Sher expanded on Humboldt’s intellectual context, mentioning Goethe and “his influence on the American Transcendentalists: Margaret Fuller, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Bronson Alcott and Ralph Waldo Emerson” (*Goodreads* 2018: 5 June). After the group confirmed its mutual interest in Humboldt’s connections to the antebellum philosophy of Emerson and his followers, one member asked whether listening to *The Invention of Nature* was advisable. “I’m able to listen to some pretty heady intellectual reads and do ok,” Sher replied, admitting that often a text “needs to be read instead of listened to,” especially for citing quotations in posts. The comment not only affirmed their commitment to this challenging text, but also signaled the level of analysis that would be taking place.

Sher then raised perhaps the most prescient of Humboldt’s contributions, soliciting feedback on how he “predicted global warming/climate change in the early nineteenth century,” and how although “it has happened, warnings have not been heeded.” Humboldt’s anticipation of global warming and climate change—“he had foresight about what actions we take in nature,” starting “with mining and made realizations and improvements there”—inspired responses to the question of “why we keep seeing repetition in history” (*Goodreads* 2018: 7–8 June). Sher recommended *Sapiens: A Brief History of Human Kind* for further insight into the conundrum of cyclical crises in human history, a book she warns is “provocative as H and unsettling.” To illustrate a similar instance of history’s cyclical nature, a discussant provided a link to the biography of Alexander Hamilton, highlighting how “the divisive politics we think are particular to today’s time were actually happening with just as much vigor in President Washington’s cabinet” (*Goodreads* 2018: 6 June).

The cultural resistance to the proto-Darwinian strain of Humboldt was raised as a potential cause for the perpetuation of global warming by Ray, a Chattanooga, Tennessee resident. Such theories “would receive a mixed welcome in my part of the world. I live in the South where evolution is controversial and climate change is suspect.” Ray then shared a link to the Scopes Monkey Trial Festival in Dayton, TN, a town known as “Monkey City” where residents claim the trial was merely a media publicity stunt to draw revenue from tourism to the area. Sher then recommended *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America’s Continuing Debate over Science and Religion*. “I will look into it,” Ray wrote (*Goodreads* 2018: 14 July). Individual and collective benefits accrued from Ray’s contribution of hyper-local and regionally specific knowledge to the forum.

As attention turned to *The Invention of Nature's* treatment of “the people who built their careers, economic philosophies, and social movements on the foundation that Humboldt provided,” one reader commented, “Learning about how he helped other famous figures (like Charles Darwin, Henry David Thoreau, and John Muir) to their own heights was fascinating” (*Goodreads* 2018: 7 June). After sharing insights and data on Humboldt’s Western influences mentioned in the text, conversation extended to Eastern influences not mentioned in the text. Rumination on Humboldt’s maxims, “Behind variety is unity,” and “Nature must be felt to be understood,” led to the insight that Goethe was similarly influenced by Hinduism’s “idea that the One is present in the many—the wave is the ocean.” Consideration of how “comparison became Humboldt’s fundamental means of studying nature” turned the focus toward his transcendence of conventional scientific thought bound to the mathematics and theory of his time. One reader found this “very interesting, because today we are so [dominated by] hard science learning in our study of nature.” Humboldt’s indefatigable experimentation with electricity and theoretical “fascination with this field” prompted the observation that he was not alone in such pursuits—“think Mary Shelley and *Frankenstein*.” Marveling at these “wonderful, creative, and innovative ideas,” Sher posed the provocative question, “Who are our ultra creative scientific thinkers today?” (*Goodreads* 2018: 8 June). As with the general pattern of interaction on this forum, close textual interpretation at the sentence level led to discussion of extra-textual yet relevant historical contexts and, in this case, the creative process of contemporary technological innovation.

Such deep discussion not only occurs on controlled forums whose digital design caters to precisely such interactions. Social media and SMS such as Twitter now provide a digital affordance for intellectual discussion of immersive and literary texts. The publication of the print books *Love and Ruin* and *Longreads: Best of 2011* reflects how social media has been “a disruptive force upon traditional processes of literary creation” (Sedo 2011: 7). Both titles, the former published by *Atavist* and the latter *Longreads*, are products of born-digital platforms specializing in longform literary journalism. These anthologies reflect how digital publishers now can “build a book not just for an audience, but of and audience,” particularly those active on @Atavistmag and @Longreads, ironically rendering its originally liquid online stories “frozen in book form because marketing-wise they proved so dynamic” in circulating through social media, particularly the #Longreads hashtag (Garber 2011). #Longreads and #Longform host vigorous discussions of immersive texts such as “Death Row Book Club,” a topic with self-reflexive undertones pointing to the therapeutic effects of reading communities. The diversity of interest groups and cross-pollination with other hashtags on the topic extend from the Marshall Project (dedicated to reform of prisons and the criminal justice system) to #cancer (focused on a *Guernica* story on reconciling with death sentences in pediatric cancer wards and on death row), DC Books to Prisons, The Art for Justice

Fund, and Chicago Books to Women in Prison. That these entities can come together and find common ground for future collaboration testifies to the power of online reading communities to enact social change.

Significant longform journalism missing from traditional mainstream news headlines—such as *Atavist's* “Axes of Evil,” on how the chopping down of a poplar tree in the DMZ outside of North Korea in protest of an ax murder nearly caused World War III—has moved intellectual culture online. One Twitter user lauded the intellectual life now thriving online: “I love the philosophical podcasts” hosted by *Longform* “and [how] long-form format conversations are becoming more popular,” in the process “connecting us all and making us smarter!” (Bigalke 2018). Flexing-bicep, brain, and heart emoticons followed, along with tags for #Longreads, #podcasts, and #philosophy. Social media’s service to journalism’s democratic function arose in another tweet claiming,

without journalists on Twitter, @Fahrenthold’s investigation of the Trump Foundation would have lost a powerful research tool. Guantanamo would have gotten a lot darker without @CarlRosenberg’s live feed. The NY trial of Reza Zarrab would have been largely censored in Turkey.

(Klasfeld 2018)

The Chelsea Manning trial, he noted, would have had no public record without the tweets of journalists. He also lauded @BradHeath for his @bigcases bot connecting “more people with the raw records of our public institutions than perhaps any other act of journalism in memory.” With both this watchdogging function and the capacity for audiences to extend and expand upon longform storytelling content in unprecedented ways, it is apparent that criticism “about the potential nuance in 280 characters” needs to acknowledge that threads can “afford more opportunity for context” than text divorced from social media and the internet’s rich data resources (Klasfeld 2018).

Once a closed solitary process, deep reading’s revival through social media has made intellectual culture possible in the digital ecosystem. The web’s most profitable business models continue to thrive on longtail economics, which has allowed niche products to find their markets and vice versa. An expanding array of print and digital media, both rediscovered and newly created, continue to inspire mutually enriching interaction among radically diverse and intersecting networks of online audiences. Rather than marketing to an assumed audience, publishers can interact directly with reading communities (Garber 2011). Social media has built more elasticity and efficiency into the publishing industry. Longform content has thus emerged organically from the online reading culture itself (Garber 2011). Now more than ever, readers of both print and digital content are interacting in ways reminiscent of the learned exchanges at coffee houses and bread-and-cheese clubs of the seventeenth

century, carrying on the legacy of intellectual discussion and spirited debate with the benefit of online access to the richest data resources in media history, perhaps the most supreme gift of the digital age.

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# 3

## ON-DEMAND TV AND THE BINGE WATCHING REVOLUTION

Prior to the publication of the first DVD box set in 2000, which featured the opening season of the *X Files*, television viewing had been limited to the flow model of continuous programming on weekly or daily schedules over the course of seasons for finite runs. The introduction of reruns enabled audiences to revisit favorite television shows rather than losing them after a single viewing to the ceaseless ebb and flow of new programming. The VCR (videocassette recorder) and DVR (digital video recorder) then allowed viewers to record and savor programs. But until the first DVD box set appeared in 2000, serialized TV content was not available for purchase because it had yet to be produced according to a publication model. The first box sets thus commodified on-air programming into an aesthetic object, a key turning point in media history when the industry began, in effect, publishing flow (Kompare 2006a, 2006b, 2010; Kackman et al. 2010; Robinson 2017).

According to flow TV's advertising-dependent business model, producers sell programming content to networks that in turn sell space to advertisers at a profit in exchange for delivering an audience. "While the individual episode or series may end, the viewer's immersion in the televisual flow does not—it is the central experience of television" (Robinson 2017: 35). The DVD box set, however, introduced an entirely different business model dependent on individual sales rather than advertising for revenue. Sold directly to consumers, this media product offered an unprecedented degree of control over the viewing of TV content. The conflation of these two modes of cultural production ultimately paved the way for the binge watching revolution, a movement now mainly associated with streaming on-demand television through over-the-top (OTT) services such as Netflix and Amazon (McCormick 2016). In 2013, 10% of viewers reported watching the entire season of *Arrested Development* in less than

twenty-four hours (Matrix 2014: 120). Audiences had been acculturated to the practice earlier that year when *House of Cards* and *Orange is the New Black* caused a sensation with their full-season releases.

The enticing formatting of streaming platforms that encourages viewing of back-to-back episodes and entire seasons in just days sparked a flurry of online discussion among fans and critics on the perils and promises of television's digital revolution (Matrix 2014). The *Los Angeles Times* marveled at how "Television has become something to be gorged upon, with tales designed to be told over months consumed in a matter of hours," as new modes of storytelling and digital design emerged precisely to elicit such extended viewing (McNamara 2012). *Wired* astutely observed that binge watching had not only gone mainstream, but that its spellbinding allure represented a new media form so powerful as to encroach upon the established routines of daily life:

Whatever our televisual drug of choice—*Battlestar Galactica*, *The Wire*, *Homeland*—we've all put off errands and bedtime to watch just one more, a thrilling, draining, dream-inducing immersion experience that has become the standard way to consume certain TV programs.

(Paskin 2013)

Over a decade earlier, in the early 2000s, "the widespread availability of the box set created and encouraged the pattern of consumption we now identify as binge viewing (the viewing of multiple episodes of a show at one sitting)," mainly because viewers could own and curate advertising-free content previously available only on cable television and later through recording on DVR (Robinson 2017: 35). After the cable industry fulfilled the fantasy of ad-free content in the 1980s and elevated the production quality of serialized television, DVDs sold in box sets—a new sort of pay TV—"extended the reach of the institution of television in home video" (Kompare 2006b: 338). In the music industry, vinyl records, and later cassettes and CDs, similarly fueled a culture of autonomous consumption rooted in selection, ownership, and curation of material as an alternative or supplement to passive listening to ad-laden commercial radio. The publication of ephemeral TV (analogous to over-the-air radio) enabled time-shifted viewing, which set the stage for digital on-demand media (Kompare 2006b: 338).

The publication of flow TV as DVD box sets thus initiated a sea change in the culture of television consumption, particularly of content demanding sustained attention at the season level of narration. The shift echoed the appearance of the Victorian triple-decker novel more than a century earlier, a form built from serialized chapter installments published in weekly story papers such as the *New York Ledger*. Just as those works were not isolated to fiction, but spanned the journalistic gamut from editorials to historical profiles to topics of learned debate, the rise of nonfictional storytelling is evident in streaming

service companies' investment in documentaries such as *Icarus* and *O.J.: Made in America*. Although both documentaries debuted on the big screen at the prestigious Cannes Film Festival, neither appeared in theaters thereafter but instead streamed directly into audience's homes and private mobile devices via streaming (or subscription) video on demand (SVOD). It is indeed a telling sign of the impact of home video on box office sales that the most critically acclaimed of entries at Cannes in 2017, *Okja* and *The Meyerowitz Stories (New and Selected)*, were Netflix originals produced according to episodic on-demand formats ideal for binge watching (Dreier 2017: 8).

The explosion of video-on-demand is evident in the more than 100 online video services that are now available in the USA alone, 40% of which launched during a massive industry surge between 2014 and 2016 (James and Villareal 2016). Netflix and Amazon have disrupted the traditional release window of motion pictures by circumventing the theatres (Dreier 2017: 8). Streaming television's influence extends to network television, which is now reformatting its programming content to appear more like their ad-free on-demand competitors. Fox Networks Group, for example, has established the goal of reducing its television advertising time to two minutes per hour by 2020. As the standard of quality for home video content has sharply risen, and original programs produced for SVOD platforms achieve prominence in the upper echelon of the film industry, Fox is at the leading edge of re-inventing advertising and "the value of the commercial." Fox aims to "provide more value by limiting commercials and creating new commercialization" based on time spent watching ads versus the number of views of a TV show. The measure is designed to be "better for networks' health" by reducing the number of overall ads and increasing the immersive longform quality of their narrative television content. It also promises to be "better for advertisers" by enabling the production of fewer, higher-impact commercials produced to target narrower demographics with greater precision than the broad-appeal traditional TV ad designed to generate impressions (Bruell 2018). Viewer autonomy has increased along with the quality and quantity of editorial and commercial content. The former is now consumed in larger doses than ever, while the latter appears less frequently on network TV as spot advertising. Marketers have also reconceived the television ad as a main rather than peripheral media text, particularly in the epic scale of branded documentaries as discussed in Chapter 4. In these ways, the on-demand revolution has encouraged deeper storytelling with more complexity than ever in the history of television (Mittell 2016).

This chapter explores the rise of binge watching at the height of the on-demand television revolution. The industry for nonfictional subjects in on-demand formats released as full seasons or mini-series such as *Narcos* (Figure 3.1), *O.J.: Made in America*, *The Jinx*, and other investigative longform is examined in light of its impact on the journalistic process. In particular, the genre of true crime has witnessed a sharp resurgence in serious journalistic reporting and writing, as for Paramount's

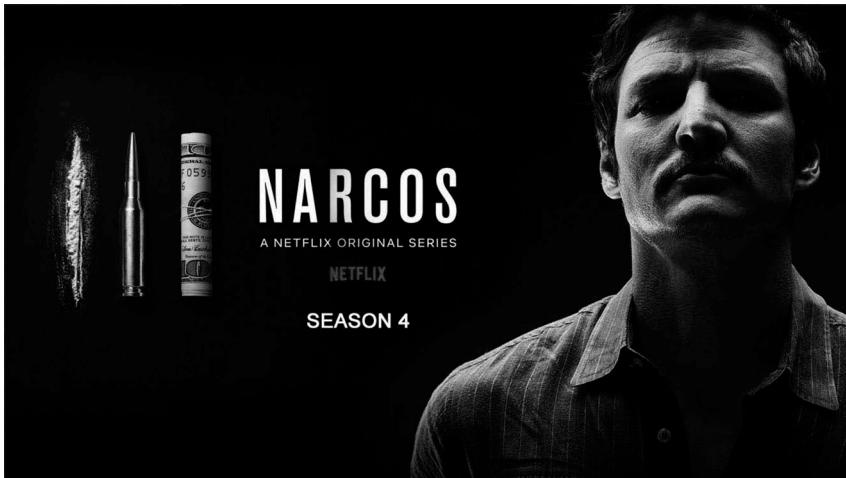


FIGURE 3.1 *Narcos*, Season 3, Netflix, 2017



FIGURE 3.2 *Waco*, Paramount, 2018

*Waco* (Figure 3.2) and its making-of television paratext, *The Revelations of Waco*. The anthology series allows for the reportage of a complex web of events and perspectives while cohering to a finite narrative arc for unified storytelling. By adding the multi-episode docu-series to its vast inventory of stand-alone ninety-minute-to-two-hour documentary films, Netflix has converged its long-tail strategy for documentary film—marked by a diverse inventory of titles catering to a wide variety of niche interests—with serial binge watching (Sharma 2016). This hybridization of contemporary television forms also remediates predigital literary

traditions of the novel and anthology to encourage autonomous, time-shifted viewing practices integral to the most complex and engaging journalistic television content in media history.

## The Expanding Template for Narrative Digital TV

Journalism's recent shift toward longer, more immersive forms has played a major role in the on-demand television revolution. Older forms converging with this new demand for longer, more dramatic narratives include feature reporting and writing from the literary world, especially its emphasis on scene, plot, character, and theme. On-demand television's embrace of increasingly complex narrative structure coincided with the proliferation of digital longform features in the wake of the *New York Times'* Pulitzer Prize-winning "Snow Fall." The rise of highly televisual multimedia features signaled a renaissance in longform storytelling, one "not just representative of the technological adeptness of today's journalists" and the technological prowess of their digital designers, "but also the driving force behind a new period of literary journalism" (Jacobson et al. 2016: 528). To be included along with the multimedia feature in this new period of literary journalism is on-demand television, as binge watching has now spread to nonfictional content, whether dramatized historical events or documentaries (Sharma 2016). Just as the "movement of long-form multimedia journalism represents a new wave of literary journalism," on-demand television displays some of the most powerful journalistic narratives available today (Jacobson et al. 2016: 528; Dreier 2017). Such programs are not isolated to the experimental fringe, but have instead taken film festivals such as Cannes by storm. At the core of this turn toward longer, more complex works is a demand for context and analysis, precisely the kind absent from the Twitter-driven news cycle predicated on headlines and speed. The deep reading and viewing of complex journalistic narrative is in part a response to what Carr (2010) identified as the scanning and skimming endemic of the early-2000s internet, arguably the shallowest phase in digital journalism's brief history.

The TV revolution has embraced higher-quality content for immersive viewing stripped of the distraction of frequent advertisements that plagued the standard thirty-minute time slot, of which roughly twenty-two minutes was dedicated to programming. The remaining eight minutes of advertising was thus dispersed throughout the twenty-two minutes of featured programming, creating the need for more frequent uses of cliff-hangers to set up commercial breaks, and recaps to reorient the viewer upon return (Huisman 2005). According to this broadcast format—which is anathema to the immersive uninterrupted quality of on-demand TV's conventions associated with published cultural products—segments were arranged around scheduled breaks in transmission. Since the ad-heavy episode of broadcast television consisted of a sequence of segments arranged around advertising, the segment became "the quintessential unit for television" (Huisman

2005: 170). In one sense, such interruptions put greater cognitive demands on viewers to retain narrative structures and thematic developments in the face of the built-in distraction of incessant commercial interruption.

It is important to note that shifts in programming format profoundly affect narrative structure. During interrupted viewing, one should not underestimate “the work the viewer has to do, in order to interpret a coherent narrative from this edited sequence, with its segmented transmission interrupted by advertisements. This narrative ability with television input is learned from experience,” as Huisman (2005) pointed out, “and is a skill comparable to the narrative literacy learned from reading novels” (170). Pre-digital television literacy was indeed culturally acquired through interpretive practices that not only accommodated spot advertising but often set it in dialogue with programming content. Yet as Johnson (2006) and Mittell (2016) have demonstrated based on analysis of narrative structure of fictional shows across dramas and situation comedies over time, television narratives were shallower in the pre-digital era and evolved toward increasingly complex interwoven plot lines toward the end of the twentieth century. “When we watch TV, we intuitively track narrative-threads-per-episode as a measure of a given show’s complexity,” which is corroborated by “evidence suggesting that this standard has been rising steadily over the past two decades” from the mid-1980s through the 2000s (Johnson 2006: 72). Throughout the 2010s, multithreading occurred on the level of the season, narrative’s largest space, rather than the relatively limited space of the episode, segment, or shot. The evolution of television toward greater narrative sophistication is a factor of the industry’s deviation from ad-interrupted storytelling told mainly at the segment level due to its inherently distracting formatting. The narrativity of early TV programming may have been simplified in order to compensate for the cognitive demand of commercially interrupted content. The shift toward greater complexity thus seemed as if “the media titans had decided to condition our brains to follow ever larger numbers of simultaneous threads” (Johnson 2006: 70).

The stereotype of the contemporary television audience’s lack of patience for lengthy narrative assumes technological innovation to be evolving on an inexorable path toward ever-more-distracting digital design (Carr 2010). The fabled seven-minute attention span of the average TV viewer is hardly a universal cognitive limitation unique to the human brain. Instead, it is a symptom of network television’s segmentation into slots roughly that length to accommodate for advertising. As the rise of binge watching shows, the appetite for the deep dive has never been more intense. Traditional television’s formatting of episodes consisting of three seven-minute segments has yielded to a longer, distinctly richer storytelling unit. The episodes of *Narcos*, for example, average fifty-six minutes each and often extend to longer than an hour. The narrative unit of the segment has expanded to the length of the episode and season, allowing for richer, more complex storytelling. VR storytelling has also expanded beyond the form’s

standard three-to-four-minute length to seven minutes or longer. Miniseries VR packages are now available for binge watching, as in *Sports Illustrated's* docu-series “Capturing Everest” (discussed in Chapter 7). The shot has become the new segment in terms of visual storytelling, just as episodes now function like the former segment, and the series correspondingly takes on the role of the episode.

Media technology’s evolution toward increasingly expansive storytelling units has enabled new narrative dynamics given the ongoing stripping away of spot advertising (if not product placement and content marketing) from digital television content. The result is visible in two major patterns identified as the Netflix Effect, specifically “the rising importance of social TV viewing practices, and new expectations about the availability of commercial-free, high quality, original television content” (Matrix 2014: 120). With the entrance of documentary content into binge watching culture, conversation about TV shows is no longer restricted to fictional content. Its movement to online forums and social media now engages direct and deep consideration of news, a process that upholds the journalistic principle of citizen participation in the public sphere. That level of participation, arguably, is also encouraged by fictional content, such as government corruption in *House of Cards* and prison reform in *Orange is the New Black*. But the instantiation of such issues in documentary programming avoids treating them at one remove as allegory and fictional analogue. *Narcos*, for example, directly engages real events and consequences of the international illegal drug trade orchestrated by Pablo Escobar and figures like him—who are real rather than embellished or composite characters—inspiring exchange on forums concerned with justice, fairness, and democracy, thus upholding journalistic service to the public interest.

Such rich online conversations inspired by narrative journalism produced for digital TV are in large part attributable to formatting designed to hold rather than divide viewer attention. As the industry phases out commercial interruptions—especially between episodes—more than just the segment’s disappearance as the smallest syntactical unit of televisual storytelling has occurred. Indeed, the sophisticated storytelling associated with on-demand TV has now become the model that both network and cable television have begun to emulate. TBS’s twenty-five-hour “binge-a-thon” typifies cable television’s adoption of the conventions of SVOD and the Netflix publishing model. The 2016 airing of the entire first season of the comedy *Angie Tribeca* limited commercial breaks to between episodes and never during them. As high-quality nonfiction television advances this model, journalistic longform projects have risen to prominence among innovative producers. *National Geographic* channel, for example, aired *He Named Me Malala* without commercials under the justification, according to the company’s Global Networks CEO Courtney Monroe, that “if a project merits treating it differently or finding an alternative business model, we’ll do that” (Lynch 2016). The decision was not an isolated exception, but an approach the company plans to continue as an ongoing programming strategy that aligns with binge watching preferences of SVOD audiences.

No longer the bastion of fictional TV content, binge watching now extends to nonfictional programs such as *Last Chance U* and *Narcos*. Journalistic storytelling now reaches epic proportions for mobile and smart TV audiences alike. What began with cable television's specially scheduled marathons of themed fictional content such as James Bond films, and programming tied to a seasonal holiday or major media event such as the Super Bowl, led to the publication of flow, as in the aforementioned 2000 box set of the *X Files* that unleashed audiences on the entirety of their beloved show in one package. Some documentary content such as NFL, NBA, and MLB highlight/interview packages then appeared, along with PBS's acclaimed World War II series, *The World at War*. DVD packages of television series were dominated by fictional content, however, until the recent revival of immersive journalistic longform storytelling. Television's definition has destabilized radically, however, due to its transmediation across platforms. Web-based television such as YouTube now offers YouTube TV, and the gaming industry has invested in streaming through PlayStation View. *Conflict* is a web documentary series, for example, dedicated to the creative and psychological rigors of conflict photo journalism. It is born digital on the internet with no presence on Netflix or Amazon. Binge watching is now distinctly a cross-platform practice that has made a decided turn toward documentary content. The industry for television narratives about the journalistic process such as *Conflict* now coalesces with the true crime genre in response to these developments. The true crime docu-series has become so prominent in the culture that it has become the subject of satire. Its tone and genre conventions are perhaps no more accurately dissected than in *American Vandal*, a Netflix Original released as eight episodes in 2018.

With targets such as HBO's *The Jinx* and Netflix's *Making a Murderer*, two smash hits appearing in 2015, the mockumentary *American Vandal* is itself packaged as a docu-series. The satire makes light of how SVOD true crime, unlike *Dateline* or *America's Most Wanted*, "allows for more uncertainty—sometimes the wrong man is fingered"—than traditional journalistic forms, but typically renders a satisfying ending "signaling the deliverance of justice" (Petrusich 2018). Crimes in these narratives bring consequences. *American Vandal* sardonically explores the case of profane images spray-painted on vehicles in a high school faculty parking lot with evidence hinging on the vandal's aesthetic preferences. Through this case, a subtle critique of TV docu-series convention in the true crime genre emerges. A contemplative ponderous theme song sets the keynote for the narrative, which is more interested in the investigation than the crime itself (Petrusich 2018). The invocation of "America" in the title, as in *O.J.: Made in America*, signals a story of national significance, in this case lampooning the institutionalization of docu-series narrative clichés. The replication of those conventions is particularly conspicuous among producers bent on harnessing longform's prestige. Perhaps prompted by the philosophical ruminations of Sarah Koenig on the podcast *Serial*, true crime docu-series often dwell at length on the larger, deeper questions, particularly the

epistemological ambiguity that inevitably intervenes in the reporting and writing of investigative journalism. Such reflection is skewered in *American Vandal* as the investigator, a former morning show radio broadcaster seeking the prestige and recognition of a popular longform investigative story wonders, “What was the meaning of the [graffiti]? What if it truly doesn’t matter who did it or why or whether they get caught?” (*American Vandal* 2018). The genre is distinguished by meta-narrative examination of the journalistic process, a self-aware turn toward transparency that more broadly marks journalism’s development in the digital age (Singer 2015).

## Binge Watching Documentaries

Binge watching was once a guilty pleasure associated with fictional television, especially *Game of Thrones* and *House of Cards*. The thought of binge watching documentaries was initially perceived as an odd pastime given nonfictional TV’s association with broadcast journalism. Pre-internet documentary televised content traditionally occupied formats no longer than the thirty-minute nightly news or the one-hour weekly news magazine such as *Sixty Minutes*. But with the rise of absorbing narratives initiated in part by Ken Burns’ *The Civil War*—the first of his many successful PBS epic documentaries covering American social, historical, and cultural subjects—audience engagement in nonfictional TV soared. In nine episodes totaling eleven hours and thirty minutes that first aired serially in 1990 and was released in 2002 on DVD, the story of the Civil War appeared on the largest stage in the history of documentary television. Burns established a big-screen presence on the small screen with this marathon series that dwarfed the ninety-minute-to-two-hour running times of most feature documentaries in theaters. When asked about binge watching Netflix documentaries in 2016, Burns said, “I am close friends with Beau Willimon, the creator of *House of Cards*, so I’m up to date on that” (Quintanilla 2016). Burns of course also contributed to the revolution in television audience engagement through absorbing episodic storytelling, playing a vital role in the changing culture of TV viewing that has led to documentary and nonfictional binge watching.

Burns led the televised documentary renaissance toward more involving structures. Each of the nine uniquely gripping episodes of *The Civil War* aired over five consecutive nights in 1990, establishing a new standard for narrative. Subdivided into numerous chapters or vignettes, each element contributes to its episode’s overarching theme or focus, usually concentrating on a battle or topic. Years before the digital age, audiences were engaging in a proto-binge watching practice, which proved essential to the show’s success as the most-watched program ever to air on PBS, garnering 39 million viewers of at least one episode (Ward et al. 1992). This documentary serial formula blends seamlessly with contemporary documentaries on Netflix, many of which aspire to emulate its

nuanced storytelling techniques. Netflix documentaries routinely intimate Burns' signature momentum between segments—a kind of televisual equivalent of poetic enjambment—via mounting tension, scene setting, and character development. *The Civil War* exudes virtuoso documentary storytelling, particularly in its movement from broad and abstract issues of nationhood and political ideology to the minutiae of lived experience via action sequences, and personal interludes into the interiority of soldiers and their families.

The mainstreaming of binge watching is evident in the larger demographic shift toward streaming video consumption, which rose to 61% of young adults in the USA in 2017 (Rainie 2017). This trend corresponds with an exodus from cable TV that has expanded to one in seven Americans (Horrigan and Duggan 2015: 19). Streaming's rising popularity is of course deeply interconnected with binge watching, which itself became a spectacle when a Brooklyn man consumed ninety-four hours of television straight in 2016, setting a world record and suffering acute hallucinations in the process. Such stunts are indicative of the impact of streaming services such as Amazon Prime and Netflix, which have propelled binge watching to a popular pastime (Gibbs 2016).

Documentary's new place in binge watching culture is evident in the audience rebellion incited in 2016 when Netflix chose not to renew PBS's contract, a decision that eliminated a large amount of its educational documentaries produced in serial form. One year later, after Amazon Video had taken over much of that programming, Netflix quietly replaced many of the PBS shows it had dropped. It thus appeared "that the cries of people who were binge-watching Ken Burns' educational programs were heard by Netflix" (Rawden 2017). The rise from 10% in 2010 to 55% in 2018 of households subscribing to at least one streaming service corresponds with trends toward increased binge watching, frustration with pay TV, and a desire for greater control of data. According to a 2018 Deloitte study, 75% of all viewers say they have binge watched TV and, among them, 34% binge watch on a weekly basis. When controlling for millennials, the percentages escalate significantly to 86% binging at least once and 42% weekly, among them averaging seven episodes per sitting, just under the nine-to-twelve-episode length of most seasons (Spangler 2018; Westcott et al. 2018). One analyst has commented that "streaming has changed viewer behavior, shifting the window of tolerance for longer, nonfiction films" (Jackson 2017). What previously seemed like too much work in the form of cognitive strain in processing documentary storytelling compared to lighter fictional content has now given way to new, more engaging expressions of the genre.

The sharp rise in demand for higher-quality television has coincided with the SVOD movement that the data analytics firm Deloitte began tracking in 2009. Consumers are subscribing in record rates to streaming services to access high-quality, original content. The preference for high-quality television escalated to an unprecedented milestone in streaming television when the percentage of viewers willing to pay for streaming services surpassed that of those content with free

programming. That is, in 2016 more viewers watched free rather than paid streaming services compared to 2017, when the trend flipped. Significantly, viewers reported streaming 40% of their content free and 35% paid in 2016. One year later, the percentage of free streaming content viewed shrunk to 30% as paid streaming rose to 45%, prompting researchers to characterize audience demand for streaming as “insatiable” (Westcott et al. 2018). The rise of paid streaming content correlates with a sharp increase in quality of programming. At the 2018 Golden Globe Awards, Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon, three of the largest streaming services in terms of subscribers, dominated the competition, earning five out of the eleven awards in the category of television (Westcott, et al. 2018).

It seems counter-intuitive that consumer culture would not remain content with light free television content, and instead reach for dense, thought-provoking fare at a price. Curiously, the “vast wasteland” of low-quality commercial television programming that FCC Commissioner Newton Minow lamented in 1961 could only be corrected at the time through his top-down regulatory intervention. To counterbalance the prevalence of game shows, formula comedies, and sensationalized melodramas, Minow tellingly instituted new high-quality content in the form of nonfiction. By 1962, the major networks aired 400 new documentaries in the wake of the regulations, which also expanded the fifteen-minute nightly news to thirty minutes (Hilmes 2006). Nonfictional visual storytelling at that time had yet to discover that it could freely borrow from the techniques of fictional film. Journalistic TV remained rather dry by comparison to the harrowing narrative yarns witnessed in today’s best documentary series. The hybridization of documentary and journalistic television with fiction is perhaps no more apparent than in the dramatic recreation of global news events in the SVOD series *Waco* and *Narcos*, works that epitomize media convergence at the crucible of digital television.

The documentaries of Minow’s 1960s-era television audience were produced primarily for the edification of the general public, nobly serving the democratic mission of principled journalism. Thus documentary’s origin as a foil and antidote to toxic fictional television content has left an imprint on the genre as inherently antithetical to engaging and suspenseful narrative. Indeed, the preponderance of documentary television of the pre-Burns era indicates that its public education imperative often precluded its capacity to entertain. Its function thus delivered precisely what Minow had intended, which was a serious and sober contrast to commercial television pandering to the lowest common denominator through garish and extreme forms of escapism of the sort associated with paperback genre fiction. Because of the genre’s roots in these black-and-white dry productions with voice-of-god (usually male) sonorous narration, the prospect of binge watching documentaries has been slow to develop in the culture. Thus only after the firm establishment of fictional TV binge watching has the practice been widely applied to documentaries. Interestingly, binge watching itself may be more attributable historically to the work of Burns’ *Civil War*, when PBS finally found

a pitch-perfect narrative formula for longform documentary, than to *House of Cards* and *Game of Thrones*, the Netflix dramatic series that brought the term and practice to prominence as a noticeable phenomenon in media culture.

The transformation of documentary into absorbing highly emotional narrative has enabled viewers to find in documentary television not arduous cognitive labor done only for one's education, but a form of entertainment. Indeed many of the younger generation of viewers who make up the vast majority of binge watchers have never seen a documentary film in theaters. Those old enough to remember attending a theatrical screening of Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* or Morgan Spurlock's *SuperSize Me* would be too old already for the Z and Millennial generations who have made binge watching a cultural phenomenon. Indeed, "where the idea of watching a multi-hour documentary felt like work" akin to "a dutiful act of 'cultural vegetable' consumption," now given the richly woven narratives offered online, "it sounds like a fun binge watch" (Jackson 2017). Binge watching is now well suited to long documentaries due to their serial formatting designed to build suspense and narrative momentum. *Long Strange Trip*, the 2017 Martin Scorsese-produced documentary on The Grateful Dead rock band, simultaneously functions as a complete four-hour film and a streaming Amazon Prime six-part series. The critically acclaimed award-winning *Making a Murderer* is a powerful Netflix documentary in the true crime genre spanning ten episodes, simultaneously released in December of 2015, of roughly one hour each for a total of 607 minutes. Consummate longform storytelling has never had more space and unencumbered freedom than on this current serialized platform.

Crucially, documentary's migration onto television through PBS, boxed DVDs, cable, and finally serialized on-demand streaming reflects its hybridization with fictional forms previously understood as strictly entertainment. Traditional binaries such as the consumer orientation toward leisure and labor, entertainment and news—divisions that initially prevented producers from crafting documentary journalism as serial longform packages—have yielded to a more fluid understanding in the industry and culture of genre. Comedy has blended with journalism, for example, in the original satirical news of Stephen Colbert's *Colbert Report* and Jon Stewart's *Daily Show* that spawned the career of John Oliver, whose content involves serious and rigorous investigative reporting and writing. The boundaries are increasingly blurring between the sixteen television genres of comedy, crime drama, documentary, drama, historical drama, horror, musical comedy, news, news magazine, pro wrestling, reality, sitcom, special event, suspense, talk, and TV movie (Gray 2007: 89). Documentary is one of the many genres commercial television has poached from public broadcasting, suggesting the many ways in which entertainment has become integral to journalism. The very concept of journalistic reporting and writing as "storytelling" implies narrativity and thus a sense of aesthetic structure, which for journalism's imperatives conveys the civic function of enabling the viewer to

participate in the public sphere through compelling content delivered in an appealing manner. Entertainment bears crucial functions as it operates within the realm of journalism, particularly through the genres of news magazine and documentary.

Just as emotion merges into journalism culture through television news fandom, as in the case of the passionate followers of celebrity journalists Anderson Cooper, Keith Olberman, and Bill O'Reilly, the separation of hard news from feature storytelling can no longer be maintained in the current digital ecosystem. Patterson (2000) defines hard news as “coverage of breaking events involving top leaders, major issues or significant disruptions in the routines of daily life, such as earthquakes or airline disasters” (3). But narrative journalism’s association with escapist, shallow “soft news” on television (Postman and Powers 1992; Kerbel et al. 2000) now yields to a different online media culture that increasingly provides in-depth exploration of past headlines originally reported as breaking news according to inverted pyramid form. Thus the blending of genres makes binge watching an odd bedfellow of hard news, precisely because of its capability of delivering more nuanced analysis and detailed context on “information about these events” of importance in order to reinforce “citizens’ ability to understand and respond to the world of public affairs” (Patterson 2000: 3). News in the digital ecosystem, and particularly as a subject to be explored in depth in the form of SVOD programming, is not the first draft of history in this sense, but its richer, more immersive and substantial second draft produced on a much slower news cycle. Slow Journalism, as coined by the British quarterly journal *Delayed Gratification*, is premised on the concept that to be the last to report a story is to be both more accurate and thorough. Longer news cycles allow for not only richer narratives, but also more carefully produced and visually appealing data visualizations.

Jurgen Habermas (1989) understood the rational public sphere as necessitating the separation of the heart from the mind in order to protect it from becoming intoxicated with falsehoods. This point aptly describes today’s online crisis of fake news and digital media’s liability to speed and emotion at the expense of fact-checking and reflection conspicuous in today’s manic Twitter-driven headlines. But beyond that error-prone daily production cycle, journalistic television’s immersive turn toward longform storytelling draws from the world of cinema, as evidenced by Martin Scorsese’s (*Long Strange Trip*) and Oliver Stone’s (*Guantanamo*) recent SVOD projects that bridge the gap between the rational and the emotional. Fiction film icons have married their narrative aesthetic to documentary and nonfictional subjects for digital television. Subjects such as a rock band, treated with the kind of intensity and thoroughness Scorsese brings to the topic of the Grateful Dead, takes on the quality of an immersive journey into the social, political, and economic dimensions of the 1960s counterculture movement. Viewing a film of this length requires energy and creativity on the part of the viewer on a scale that subsumes much more than the hard news genre can, or

should, command given its formal structural limitations. In the hands of Hollywood's most famous auteurs of the fiction film, the SVOD docu-series takes on the unmistakable quality of literary journalism, a genre of nonfiction narrative that "adheres to all the reportorial and truth-telling covenants of traditional journalism, while employing rhetorical and storytelling techniques more commonly associated with fiction" (Roiland 2018: 176).

The deeper emotional involvement with serial documentary television parallels journalism culture's recent embrace of passion and compassion evident in both content and audience behaviors. Television fandom, as Gray (2007) points out, is an emotive cultural practice that previously stood "in contrast to the news as a somber, rational, informational genre" (76). Binge watching falls into this category of emotive cultural practice, especially given its breach of scheduled behaviors and conventional routines that had evolved to compartmentalize and restrict the majority of television viewing primarily to primetime evening hours and weekends. With time-shifted on-demand programming and delivery to mobile devices, new media technology has liberated audiences from these conventions, allowing for indulgence in full seasons at once with binges far exceeding the traditional two-hour limit of viewing per show. A hallmark of fandom is behavior that borders on obsessive, one that is recognizable for its capacity to bring an uncommon passion and intensity to a pastime. As Swiss experimental artist Peter Fischli once observed, "There's certainly a subversive pleasure in occupying yourself with something for an unreasonable length of time," especially in an atmosphere of sustained concentration and relaxed pleasure (quoted in Dowling 2010).

Certainly the novelty of binge watching documentaries is something of an illusion built upon older definitions of nonfictional TV's association with dispassionately delivered news. Of course, much of that understanding is easily undermined by historically poignant moments in television broadcast history in which journalists revealed their emotions openly, as in Walter Cronkite's moving address upon the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, one that transcended the category of news altogether with its reassuring homiletic import. Binge watching's embrace of nonfictional content positions journalism with respect to the practice in provocative ways. Springing from an "age-old leisure-work binary," entertainment's role in nonfictional programming for SVOD is far more complex than "just entertaining," but rather "works in a myriad of complex ways in the fields of news, documentary, and advertising" (Gray 2009: 12). As a cultural practice predominantly associated with fiction, binge watching's new adoption of nonfiction forms into its purview is a result of the commercial media industry's discovery of public broadcast content for its own devices, a pattern manifested in the mainstreaming of podcasts attempting to replicate the success of the NPR off-shoot *Serial*. As Gray (2009) notes, "too often scholars and pundits have discussed television entertainment simply as *not* television news," a binary that sets up an "epic battle between information and

entertainment, ‘need’ and ‘want,’ civic duty and selfish desires, importance and frivolity, wherein entertainment perennially plays the role of the bad guy” (12).

Documentary’s late adoption as a genre worthy of production designed for binge watching was due primarily to the density of its content that appeared too cognitively demanding to be viewed over extended periods. But now with nesting and transitional elements in visual storytelling, the genre is just as well suited to long viewing as fiction. Just as print drew on fictional storytelling techniques to advance literary journalism and what Tom Wolfe called the “nonfiction novel,” now we find nonfictional forms, including historical dramatizations and documentaries, borrowing from the fiction film’s narrative grammar and lexicon. Burns’ use of brief vignettes within chapters, which themselves were nested within interconnected episodes, set the template for this sort of nonfictional television storytelling.

### **“Reality Effects” and Blurred Genre**

The fictional category most closely related to the television documentary is the historical drama. Although technically fictional, this category is rooted in serious reporting and writing in the cases of *Narcos*, on the Pablo Escobar narcotic drug trafficking empire of the 1970s and 1980s, and *Waco*, chronicling the standoff between FBI agents and David Koresh’s Branch Davidians. This fact-based genre of historical drama produced for on-demand television suggests the largely arbitrary nature of genre distinctions as artificial constructs. The thorough interpenetration of genres has been fueled in part by digital convergence characterized by the spread of content across media forms, which merge in an ongoing process at the intersections of technology, industry, culture, and audience (Jenkins et al. 2018). Journalism told through serial on-demand video, a media form previously reserved for fiction, employs “reality effects,” which Roland Barthes (1989) defines as fictional embellishments and rhetorical gestures designed to enhance the nonfictional veracity of a work.

Documentary “slice of life” films from the mid-twentieth century such as *High School* purported to deliver unmitigated truth. But pure objectivity is never attainable given how the presence of a camera alters subjects’ natural behavior, in addition to subjectivity entering production via decisions regarding camera positioning, angles, and editorial selections. Beyond these, documentaries have also produced sound effects to heighten the reality of any given scene. In the podcast *Ear Hustle*, for example, producers used the studio to recreate the chaotic sound of a fight that broke out weeks earlier in the entirely different location of a jail cell. Overtly manipulative tactics, for example, have been deployed by Michael Moore in his artificial staging—via sly post-production edits—of Hollywood star and National Rifle Association (NRA) supporter Charlton Heston’s refusal to answer questions as a coarse rebuff of his entreaty to show compassion for an elementary school girl killed by a gunman. Thus

“reality effects,” commonly used in fiction to signify concrete reality, are details that essentially “say nothing but this: we are the *real*,” according to Barthes (1989: 148). Benjamin (1968) mentions that documentary photojournalism in magazines engages in similar signposting by prompting the viewer with captions. Captions of “pictures in illustrated magazines soon become even more explicit and more imperative in the film [medium] where the meaning of each single picture appears to be prescribed by the sequence of the preceding ones,” according to Benjamin (1968: 226). Viewer cues are fabricated through other means such as firing a shot behind an actor without forewarning to create the effect of him being startled by a knock at the door (Benjamin 1968: 230).

Even breaking news reportage of the seemingly most objective sort, such as raw citizen-produced video, must draw on symbolic representation to communicate its story. The constructed nature of journalistic storytelling using such reality effects for print media is aptly captured in John D’Agata and Jim Fingal’s *The Lifespan of a Fact*. Barthes’s point is particularly useful in understanding the slippage between fictional dramatizations of historical events and documentaries, especially considering that re-enactments and recreations of dialogue, sound, or other details of the event typically appear in the latter category. In rhetorical constructions of “the *referential illusion*,” as Barthes (1989) explains, “just when these details are reputed to *denote* the real directly, all that they do—without *saying so*—is signify it” (148, emphasis in original).

History, like fiction, is always narrated, and thus to some extent constructed and recreated. This is not to say that objectivity, although unattainable, is not a worthy standard to strive for in journalistic productions. Indeed, as Pulitzer Prize winner Stephen Berry points out in *Watchdog Journalism*, objectivity is a method, if not a reality, which ethical journalists should adopt. Indeed, journalism’s migration into SVOD platforms has taken a myriad of forms drawing from such disparate genres as historical biography, reality TV, and crime drama. It should be noted that historical dramas based on recognizable stories that have circulated in the media, such as those surrounding Escobar and Koresh, are frequently held up to scrutiny for their fidelity to the events, both formally in professional critical reviews, and through often more rigorous judgment of informal online commentators. Because “the relating of facts and statements of different views of different parties is part of the same procedure” as managing multiple characters in a fictional narrative, media practice unfolds in such a way that makes bias and balance entities that are not mutually exclusive, especially from the inevitability of selecting the narrative structure and rhetorical effects of journalistic reporting and writing (Maras 2013: 20).

The transmediation of Pablo Escobar’s biography in the Netflix series *Narcos* is an ideal representative of the “reality effects” at work in his repackaging for popular consumption, ostensibly in the form of binge watching. The popularity of the piece illustrates precisely how serious credible journalism, corroborated by the *Wall Street Journal*’s promotion of *Narcos* through the digital longform

story “Cocainenomics,” can take the form of biographical/historical drama. As the legendary documentary filmmaker John Grierson noted, “Men don’t live by bread alone, nor by fact alone” (as quoted in Chen 2017). To strip journalism of its capacity to entertain, even as SVOD produced specifically for binge watching, is to require of it something it has never done to begin with, which is to achieve perfect objectivity. Further, even a harsh critic of television dramas like Neil Postman (1992) allowed that the mechanized automation of such processes as fact-checking for journalistic storytelling threaten to devalue “the singular human capacity to see things whole in all their psychic, emotional, and moral dimensions” (117).

As Chen (2017) has observed of the human interface with digital media, “a person does not process information the way a computer does, flipping a switch of ‘true’ or ‘false.’” Just as “most people seem to understand that their social media streams represent a heady mixture of gossip, political activism, news and entertainment” as Pew data show, they also recognize journalism as a chameleonic form capable of occupying a diverse array of entertainment media (Chen 2017). Nearly a century ago, Grierson argued against the FCC’s attempts to strip radio of its dramatic content, urging “much of this entertainment is folk stuff … of our technological time; the patterns of observation, of humor, of fancy, which make a technological society a human society” (quoted in Chen 2017). Indeed, journalism’s migration into SVOD represents its convergence into the folkways of web natives, especially given the powerful spread across online media platforms for such programming. The charge that digital television represents “a small niche activity, produced for a limited and culturally privileged audience” is undermined by viewership that has reached mass levels even within the array of “endlessly increasing, fragmenting audiences” (Stephens 2014: 240). Complex narrative is the driving force behind the success of SVOD in ways that have impacted nonfictional journalistic programming. Producers of *The Jinx* and *Making a Murderer* have deployed journalistic reporting and writing methods that “returned to an older and higher view of their calling: not as reporters of what’s going on,” but as commentators on the culture with a storytelling template capable of “strengthening our understanding of the world” with “informed, interpretive, explanatory, even opinionated takes on current events,” as Stephens (2014: 240–241) has explained of the recent digital longform movement.

The prevalence of literary techniques in digital longform extend to historical and journalistic television designed for serial consumption, especially according to the all-at-once publication model. Although it may seem counterintuitive, such “*nonfictional narrative representations* do not necessarily have to represent physically possible storyworlds,” as in the case of political philosophy or cultural critique, as Thon (2016: 67) explains. Since “both fictional and nonfictional narrative representations represent storyworlds using rather similar representational strategies,” there is a distinct blurring and hybridity of genres that is particularly evident

in narrative journalism. The SVOD storytelling format at the level of the season highlights the “‘hybrid nature’ of contemporary forms of pseudodocumentary, mockumentary, and docudrama,” according to Thon (2016: 68), especially in Larry Charles and Sacha Baron Cohen’s *Borat*, Matt Reeves’s *Cloverdale*, and David Fincher’s *The Social Network* in film. On television, *American Vandal* skewers the true crime documentary series in perhaps the most pointed and knowing critique of its quirks, conventions, and cultural predilections. Although itself a fictional parody, its satirical import operates on the level of nonfictional social commentary on how self-reflective tactics are becoming clichés in some cases designed to draw out suspense and heighten the sense of curiosity in the succeeding episode, the essential cliff-hanger method that identifies the form. Its trite clichés notwithstanding, even the most overtly formulaic of these shows still employ a narrative complexity requiring far more demanding cognitive engagement than previous crime dramas of the 1970s such as *Starsky and Hutch*. Interestingly, shows like *Narcos* clearly leverage the sort of plot and character development of the Victorian novel, illustrating how “nonfictional narrative representations represent storyworlds in ways very similar to fictional narrative representations” (Thon 2016: 67).

### Dramatizations: *Narcos* and *Waco*

The transmedial narratology of *Narcos* crosses a wide spectrum of media and genres that include both fiction and nonfiction. Perhaps the most aggressively promoted streaming documentary series, the Netflix Original has sparked interest in Pablo Escobar’s story, which has taken on a folkloric life of its own online and in his native Colombia. *Narcos*, which is categorized in the crime drama/biographical television genre, represents a fascinating artifact of narrative journalism. In its dramatized form, the series generates more fanfare than films and books on the topic. As with interactive documentaries such as *Bear 71* and “Capturing Everest,” discussed in Chapter 7, the binge watching revolution is focused on nonfiction, place-based journalism (Schmitz Weiss 2015). Cultural geography is emphasized in *Narcos*, which features maps of drug trafficking, hideouts, and headquarters, sites that viewers known as *narcoturistas* have sought out to visit. Escobar’s brother Roberto, who founded Escobar, Inc. to license the family name, has made a lucrative business from leading tours of his brother’s haunts, a part of a cottage industry dedicated to selling his image and story in books, television shows, and documentaries. Although Netflix does not release viewer numbers, the audience for *Narcos* has been estimated at three million, far larger than that of four Hollywood films dedicated to the same topic, *Escobar: Paradise Lost*, *The Infiltrator*, *Loving Pablo*, and *American Made*. These films take liberties with the historical record, however, and move into mainstream Hollywood fiction, bearing far greater concern for entertainment than journalistic accuracy (Anderson 2018).

With production for season four underway as of 2018, the show's popularity coincides with a variety of media dedicated to Escobar's Medellin cartel. *Narconovelas*, a series of novels detailing the drug czar's exploits, offer melodramatic portraits of the traffickers' lives, with little heed for the 6000 homicides Escobar committed in 1991 and his well-documented engagement in kidnapping and torture. *El Patron del Mal*, the popular South American television series based on Escobar's biography, airs on major networks in the region. It inspired a book series extolling Escobar, who was responsible for more than 80% of the cocaine imported into the USA in the 1980s, as a kind of folk hero who freely gave his money to Colombia's impoverished populations (Anderson 2018). Although many critics in the region such as world-famous South American novelist Gabriel García Márquez denounced Escobar, media scholar Omar Rincon of the University of Andes in Bogata defended the populist Colombian cultural perspective represented in such media. García Márquez (1997) commented in his Nobel Prize-winning literary journalistic account *News of a Kidnapping* that "the most dangerous and unsettling aspect of [Escobar's] personality was his total inability to distinguish between good and evil," a moral concern that Rincon found less important than the more sympathetic narrative of the traffickers as victims whose struggle with poverty left them desperate for survival (27). García Márquez (1997) instead is appalled that Escobar's "communiques, with their exemplary style and perfect cunning, began to look so much like the truth that one was mistaken for the other." It is by virtue of this masterful deception, according to García Márquez' deeply critical perspective, that "at the height of his splendor, people put up altars and lit candles to him in the slums of Medellin" (27).

Escobar's status as the only Colombian in history to "ever possess or exercise a talent like his for shaping public opinion" has been countered with Rincon's sharp criticism of *Narcos* (Anderson 2018: 56). Escobar and his cronies, Rincon (2015) argues, are dehumanized in the show, whose narrative is told from the perspective of a DEA agent. Thus Colombians appear "something like what Trump thinks we are: the good ones are the gringos and the D.E.A. And the narcos are the comic misfits and tasteless throwbacks" (Rincon 2015). The framing of the story, he continued, "makes heroes of those that Latin Americans consider villains: the D.E.A. agents. Which, in addition to being silly, goes against reality." He ended with the rebuke, "Gentlemen of Netflix: know that the villains are the ones in the D.E.A." (Rincon 2015). Such resistance to the Netflix production is also shown in Escobar's brother Roberto's demand for 1 billion dollars to compensate for appropriating the Escobar name, which he had copyrighted in 2014. In language echoing that of his late brother, Roberto demanded the payment under the threat that if funds were not delivered, "he would close their little show" (Anderson 2018). Even more troubling backlash came to Netflix in the loss of their location scout, who was murdered in Mexico City while researching for the show's third season on the Cali cartel (Anderson 2018). As the next chapter in the saga following Escobar's death at

the hands of the DEA under a hail of bullets on a rooftop in Colombia, the series covers the Cali cartel, in season three, before taking viewers in season four into the contemporary Mexican drug trade. It was there that Netflix location scout Carlos Muñoz Portal was found shot to death in his car in Mexico City, the victim of a murder that may have been a coincidence or “a drug cartel’s warning not to film in its territory,” as Anderson (2018) conjectures.

The critical dispute here clearly impinges on Colombia’s grassroots culture, which perceives Netflix as an extension of the imperialistic hegemony associated with the USA. Interestingly, the dispute lies less with the status of Escobar himself than it does the dominant narrative of a struggling developing country defiantly reclaiming capital from the economically dominant power centers in the Americas through a kind of latter-day Robin Hood method of poetic justice. This logic is apparent in the swashbuckling heroism of the serialized novels as well as the fictional television program on Escobar that airs locally in Colombia. The historical facts in any case represent what Barthes (1977) calls “the plane of content,” which is analogous to the inert subject of the press photograph, which once treated and textured enters “the plane of expression” (20). Expression, according the Barthes, lies on the level of “second meaning” wherein one finds a “supplementary message.” In it, we discover not just the image, but “the treatment of the image (result of the action of the creator) and whose signified, whether aesthetic or ideological, refers to a certain culture of the society receiving the message” (17). In this case, that culture determining the ideological posture of media products laying claim to the narrative of Escobar’s life consist of a continuum between defiant populist Colombian nationalism versus a defense of the DEA and, by extension, US foreign policy in South America.

Similar ethical tension exists in the 2018 television docu-series *Waco*, which details the FBI raid of cult leader David Koresh’s Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas. Based on two testimonials, one from a Waco survivor and the other from an FBI agent, the documentary features dramatic recreations of scenes that painstakingly adhere to the actual event. Fidelity to the actual circumstances surrounding the protracted and deadly standoff is emphasized in Paramount’s promotional material, which promises the series will “change the way the Waco tragedy will be remembered” (Pena 2018). Indeed, the work embodies the spirit of Slow Journalism in the sense that it investigates the genuine facts of the tragedy from a variety of viewpoints, especially those closest to the fifty-one-day standoff in 1993 that resulted in a fire. (Timothy McVey’s perception of the media coverage as biased against the cult members, and overwhelmingly supportive of the FBI, inspired him to perpetrate the Oklahoma City bombing, as he confessed after his sentencing. His letters to this effect are on display in the Newseum in Washington, DC.)

In “Episode 3: Operation Showtime” of *Waco*, both parties call for a cease-fire, but under certain conditions. Koresh calls in to a local talk radio show, saying he will not surrender unless his statement on behalf of his sect is aired on

national media. The FBI agree, holding a press conference for the national media that recaps their initial raid and plays Koresh's audio tape as requested. The narrative rather sympathetically portrays Koresh's subsequent mercy killing of wounded sect member Perry Jones, whose suffering from his gunshot wounds without proper medical treatment hits a fever pitch. The event appears to be a clear sign of Koresh's grim acceptance of defeat and imminent surrender. Knowing that the nation has heard their appeal as delivered in Koresh's taped manifesto, the group packs their belongings as agents prepare to escort them out. This easing of tensions in the narrative toward a peaceful, yet bitter, denouement for the Branch Davidians abruptly pivots to reveal the episode's surprise ending: Koresh announces they are not leaving the compound. The masterful shift here in what has from the beginning been an episode deeply rooted in the theme of gradual compromise abruptly snaps the olive branch, pressing the viewer onto the next episode.

Despite the lack of audience data indicating which episodes prompt continuous viewing, one can conjecture that the narrative structure of "Episode 3: Operation Showtime" has made this perhaps the most likely of all episodes in the *Waco* series to motivate completion of the remainder of the series. Indeed, empathy for the sect builds from the beginning, especially through the first major accord struck with the FBI. Mass media messaging of the sect's principles is an act of respect reflective of the pillars of US democracy, particularly the First Amendment and freedom of religion. The conviction and intensity of the sect's beliefs then distills itself into the scene depicting Perry's death, which stands as a token of religious martyrdom evoking a long history of such acts from the crucifixion of Christ to the Catholic Church's backlash against Protestant Reformation, a moment in media history where free speech and religion are intimately intertwined. The twist ending, therefore, epitomizes documentary television's suitability to serial packaging, whether in a single miniseries or multiple seasons, as with *Last Chance U*. The remaining episodes represent the falling action, according to Aristotelian narrative theory, toward the tragic end depicting FBI agents setting fire to the sect's headquarters, where Koresh and the majority of his followers perish in the flames.

Released all at once in February of 2018, *Waco*'s nine-hour-and-seven-minute total running time spans six episodes. The pivotal moment propelling consumption of all six installments arguably occurs in episode three, given its irresistible pull, generated by the surge of narrative momentum detailed above. Interestingly, Paramount's interest in aligning this dramatized historical biography with journalism appeared in the company's release of *Revelations of Waco*. Available on YouTube for a micropayment, running fifteen minutes each, these short documentaries carry the dual functions of promotional news branding and paratext on behalf of the dramatized series. Thus *Waco* becomes both a scripted dramatic re-enactment and traditional documentary, as Paramount network emphasizes both narrative entertainment and journalistic rigor with *Revelations*. Further, one

can binge-watch six episodes of the behind-the-scenes YouTube docu-series—more a meta-journalistic coverage of how the media covered the story as well as original clips allowing audiences to glimpse the historical figures behind the actors—after binge watching the original at over nine hours.

McVeigh's prison letter cites the news media's bias toward the FBI, particularly as it appeared in a *Time* magazine article on the subject. He also mentions Richard Jewell, who suffered undue consequences when he was falsely accused of a Florida bombing due in large part to inaccurate media reports fingering him as the prime suspect. Interestingly, *Waco* received mixed reviews for excessive sympathy for Koresh, a point that displays reluctance among viewing audiences to have prevailing cultural memory recanted or at least reconsidered from an alternative perspective. "Contemporary myth is discontinuous," as Barthes (1977) observed, an insight particularly revealing of the digital age. Insofar as "myth consists in overturning culture into 'nature,'" especially as a matter of course, forming what he calls the "idiolect," which is the ideology of a culture expressed dialectically through its mass media (Barthes 1977: 165). With works like *Waco* and *Narcos*, however, we witness a return to long narratives, despite their highly contested and radically pluralized nature in the digital ecosystem. If idiolect is built on stereotype and prevailing cultural myth such as the one that aggrandizes the FBI's efforts as heroic in dealing the Branch Davidians, then works like *Waco* and *Narcos* function as serialized extensions of news events, borrowing from fictional techniques to challenge received cultural myth and to entertain in the process.

Journalism's latest narrative incarnation in SVOD is not merely a marketing ploy, but a novel approach to television as a new form of popular literature. In this way, the documentary and dramatized history/biography genres designed for SVOD showcase how "the discourse of myth could be taken up in the line of a trans-writing in which the text" can become "airy, light, spaced, open, uncentered, noble, and free—where writing spreads itself against the idiolect at its limit and fighting it" (Barthes 1977: 168). Accuracy, however, is still the most vital of all journalistic principles, as shown by Juan Pablo Escobar, Pablo Escobar's surviving son, in his 2009 documentary *Sins of My Father* and 2016 biography titled *Pablo Escobar: My Father*. In it, a twenty-eight-point list details what he alleges are extensive inaccuracies in *Narcos* (Escobar 2017: 87). Serial documentaries of the last decade have directly led to justice, as witnessed in the podcast *Serial*, *The Jinx*, a production which prompted the arrest of serial killer Robert Durst, *The Staircase*, which revisits the case of Michael Peterson, who was accused of killing his wife in 2004, and perhaps most chillingly, *Deliver Us from Evil*, a documentary in which the journalist coaxed a confession out of a pedophile priest. Headlines are now earning new attention not only for the aesthetic appeal of these stories for the true crime genre, and the thunderous narratives they contain, but because the digital landscape has evolved a new cultural predilection for questioning received wisdom and prevailing myths,

typically handed down by conventional journalistic storytelling in mainstream media. Journalism has never had such a grand spotlight for the reconsideration of high-profile cases, many of which are pivotal in prompting new outcomes that serve justice. In this sense, as Emily Nussbaum suggests, SVOD, especially documentary series, “have emerged as a kind of secondary appeals system,” projects that “have an afterlife online where amateur detectives reinvestigate both the crimes and the documentaries themselves” (Nussbaum 2015).

Television’s turn toward literary complexity has been noted in its fictional forms, particularly in the Zen-like storytelling of SVOD series such as *The Leftovers*, whose opening sequence functions as an elemental and profound meditation on the narrative’s thematic keynote via a dialogue-free sequence depicting the drama of birth and death among primal humans. Documentaries now enter into the increasingly explicit “relationship between literary fiction and modern TV drama,” as networks are “bidding to turn brand-name novelists, from Salman Rushdie to Jonathan Safran Foer, into showrunners,” in large part because “absorbing a season-long story can feel very much like reading a page-turner, chapter after compulsive chapter” (Nussbaum 2014). As cord cutting continues, cable TV “viewership in the 18–49 category, which advertisers care the most about, fell by 20%” (Flint and Ramachandran 2015; Strangelove 2015). The cable TV audience has diminished to a shrinking base of older viewers, who tend to be more passive about selectivity and thus lack endurance for long viewing stints. The migration to on-demand television has generated a surge of new creativity tapping older journalistic documentary forms, such as Burns’ PBS epics, for the online audience.

David Chang’s 2018 Netflix docu-series *Ugly Delicious* epitomizes streaming documentary’s turn toward complexity and empathy, attributes that also characterize immersive media from podcasting to 360/VR journalism. Simple, seemingly mundane categories of food—pizza, barbecue—examined through a sophisticated socio-cultural culinary lens complicate upon this production’s close inspection of them. Greater immersion in media intensifies media’s effects. According to cultivation theory (known as the “mean world syndrome”), greater immersion in a television show leads to the viewer’s belief that the real world resembles the television world. This breeds a distorted and paranoid view of the world (Lambe and Perse 2015). But can it lead to a more accurate, humanized understanding of a social issue of importance, such as child abuse or alcoholism? Or can it lead audiences to look beyond their banal food to its deeply intercultural and transnational origins? Status quo perspectives, in this case, are challenged by socially progressive media. Cultivation theory, it should be added, was originally based on a television media environment deprived of nonfictional content compared to today’s bounty. From the pre-digital era’s thirty-minute network news (the deepest dives represented in programs such as *60 Minutes*) and fictional situation comedies, dramas, and daytime soaps, we now witness on-demand television’s re-invention of the documentary form, one that has transformed serious journalism into serious entertainment.

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# 4

## CONTENT MARKETING'S IMMERSIVE TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING

In December of 2015, days before the release in theatres of *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, ESPN ran an article on its website that spoke volumes to the company's reliance on deception as the driving force of its integrated marketing powerhouse (Garber 2015). Like a series of images in a funhouse mirror, publicity appeared in slightly different forms across multiple platforms, as the article reviewed, with unbridled zeal, ESPN's *SC Features* television special *Star Wars: The Evolution of the Lightsaber Duel*. Its best turn at documentary content marketing to air on *SportsCenter*, the program, hosted by Mark Hamill, who plays Luke Skywalker, was repurposed in a series of sharable brief video segments ideal for mobile audiences. Disney/ESPN's tentacles extended beyond the production of its own advertisement as featured entertainment to generate its own critical reception through the review by senior staff writer Greg Garber (2015), and by carrying spot advertising to legitimate its billing as editorial content. Scheduled to air the Tuesday prior to the Friday premiere of the motion picture, the TV special played a crucial role as the last major promotion for *Star Wars*, one made more potent because viewers had to pay to see it by way of subscription to ESPN. Today the documentary circulates as highly spreadable, slickly produced free content on the internet. It also continues to appear with ESPN's other documentary films, such as the *30 for 30* series, on on-demand television platforms such as Netflix and on ESPN's apps for mobile devices and AppleTV.

The industrial logics and commercial mechanisms driving *Star Wars: The Evolution of the Lightsaber Duel* constitute one of the more conspicuous recent examples of a host of scripted, beautifully edited high-end videos designed to appear as editorial content, but are specifically produced for advertising and promotional purposes (Meyer 2014). They exhibit content marketing, a technique

in which storytelling precedes or is integrated with the sale message (Basney 2014; Meyer 2014; Trimble 2014; Hernandez 2015; Einstein 2016). As the means by which advertisers entice audiences into watching or reading “content” that the advertiser has paid for, content marketing masquerades as news or entertainment, according to Mara Einstein (2016). She finds “this trend has become so pervasive that marketers are starting to proclaim that content marketing might soon become the only type of marketing left” (2). Many of the more successful pieces like ESPN’s elude categorization as advertisements by demanding payment from viewers—either micropayment or subscription—as primary television texts on on-demand and cable television. Brands have increasingly become publishers willing to leverage paid media to tell their stories (Basney 2014). Content marketing documentaries eventually appear free online with similar pieces that were born digital. These increasingly surreptitious tactics mark a distinct turn from explicitly branded content, as in the example set by Red Bull, which invests considerable capital in media production (Brasel 2012). The energy drink company has produced its own sports documentaries featuring snowboarding, skateboarding, and stunt bicycling for its own app for the iPhone, iPad, and AppleTV. Whereas Red Bull openly displays its commercial interests through the spread of its brand, other brands have gone to great lengths to conceal their sales message behind elaborate and immersive visual storytelling (Lehu 2007; Meyer 2014; Hernandez 2015).

Companies from a diverse array of industries now recognize that the future of content marketing is online video (Trimble 2014). Marketers have redoubled their efforts to capitalize on the soaring statistics indicating record levels of online video viewing. More than 100 million hours of video are viewed on Facebook per week; the platform has recently established Facebook Live video, which introduced live stream capabilities for up to thirty minutes per clip in April of 2016. The established record of 10 million views of a Facebook Live video was shattered one month later by a thirty-seven-year-old mother whose clip of herself cavorting in a Chewbacca mask behind the wheel of her minivan in a suburban Dallas Kohl’s parking lot drew over 100 million views (Kulkarni 2016). Online video traffic accounts for 55% of total consumer traffic on the internet, a media landscape in which YouTube boasts 1 billion unique visitors per month; by 2017 video is predicted to consist of 69% of all consumer internet traffic (Trimble 2014; Cisco 2015). Marketers have also recognized the ability of social media, especially among “digital natives,” to spread popular content to a network of people who share similar interests (Serazio 2013).

## The Immersive Ad

This chapter examines the recent emergence of high-end production documentaries doubling as marketing texts. These products have joined the migration of secondary television paratexts toward primary textual status in the current cross-platform media ecosystem (Caldwell 2006; Gray 2010). Case studies of three

content marketing documentary videos selected from over fifty samples situate the trend industrially and culturally. The selections represent a range of effectiveness in reaching target audiences in the context of deregulated convergence culture, from mass markets to smaller niche followings. Analysis reveals how both media (ESPN on behalf of Disney) and non-media companies (Chipotle, a chain restaurant, and Salomon, in sporting goods) are now investing in this elaborate method of brand promotion with varied results (Lehu 2007). ESPN's *Star Wars: Evolution of the Lightsaber Duel* leverages cable television and YouTube for its advertising campaign, while Chipotle uses Netflix and online platforms for its branded storytelling in *Inside: Chipotle. On the Road* is Salomon's born-digital entry into longform documentary content marketing targeting a smaller, yet devoted, niche audience. Ownership, corporate synergy, industrial marketing, and repurposing play into promotional documentary video's more nuanced and textured lifestyle branding than traditional advertising templates have allowed (Basney 2014). As audiences increasingly seek spreadable immersive longform video on mobile devices, companies have moved out of the ghettoized genre of the infomercial into editorial spaces with sophisticated storytelling techniques packaged as eighteen-to-twenty-three-minute journalistic documentaries. Findings indicate that the popularity of these videos depends on the adaptability of corporate brands in spaces not typically associated with advertising and not yet discovered by competitors. Branded documentary video aspires to the status of primary television text, which carries greater prestige and credibility than corporate paratexts that include making-of documentaries, and explicitly corporate-controlled communication ranging from advertisements to other PR marketing communication (Hardy 2011: 8).

This intervention is conceptualized within current scholarship on television, convergence, and branding. In addition to the literature on contemporary branding by Einstein (2016) and Sarah Banet-Weiser's (2012) important book *AuthenticTM*, this chapter engages John Caldwell's (2006) work on industrial marketing and "repurposing." Although content marketing and native advertising has a long history, as demonstrated by Anna McCarthy's (2013) work on 1950s documentaries, new developments in policy toward deregulation have given rise to new forms of hybridity and corporate synergy. Unlike the 1950s, today's producers repurpose content across an array of platforms online, circulating multiple messages about their brands. Content marketing via documentary video can be classified as a "tiering" strategy to make niching and economies of scale profitable. This strategy demonstrates that many current textual formats such as branded documentaries are "institutional performances" and that television and online video's industrial discourse also function "as plays of cultural competence" (Caldwell 2006: 107). Greater competence and credibility is achieved in editorial rather than advertising space. Thus content marketing leverages conventions and production standards associated with independently produced media (including news, commentary, previews, and reviews) that operate as promotion for their main product and brand. In the case of ESPN, for example, the latest *Star Wars* film is the "mega

text” or “ur text” their paratextual documentary promotes. In the process, the “line between corporate/autonomous and commercial/noncommercial blur and merge,” as Hardy (2011: 13) observes. Commodified intertextual media products now appear in autonomous noncommercial rather than corporate commercial space, as seen in Chipotle’s promotional video’s entry into the ranks of Netflix documentaries and Disney’s latest film promotion’s appearance on ESPN as editorial content. These paratexts are products of mergers that hybridize brands (Hardy 2011: 8, 13–14). Parent companies like Disney now can use their subsidiaries such as ESPN as promotional channels, a process that can result in the hybridization of traditionally disparate genres such as cable TV sports and cinematic science fiction.

This industrial and cultural contextualization of branded documentaries is informed by Caldwell’s (2006) framework for the analysis of texts by industry as corporate strategies within the larger condition of conglomeration, deregulation, repurposing, and globalization. Analysis reveals these texts function as both corporate strategies and “as forms of cultural and economic capital integral to media professional communities and as a means by which contemporary media industries work to rationalize their operations in an era of great institutional instability” (4). As a new form of television text, these videos add a significant new dimension to Caldwell’s (2006) dichotomy distinguishing main programming from paratextual media products. The converged media ecosystem has spawned video products online that no longer fit neatly into the categories of either on-screen programming or paratexts, defined as peripheral “television texts that circulate beyond and below the on-screen programs that many textual critics isolate for analysis” (4). Since corporate entities have discovered YouTube as a marketing engine, online video has become a potent force in content marketing, making the division between such main programming and promotional paratexts far less distinct. Two of the cases first aired as programs on ESPN and Netflix, and were repurposed to YouTube, where they circulate as paratexts promoting their parent company’s main product. Television and the internet now circulate documentary longform that can serve as both regular programming—primary television texts—and branded content functioning as advertising. Longform documentary video is among the most versatile for repurposing across media platforms within the digital ecosystem. As paratexts, they not only “confound and disturb many of our hierarchies and binaries of what matters and what does not in the media world” (Gray 2010: 209) according to older scholarship, but have done so “to the point that many media objects,” as more recent findings show, “which might otherwise be considered paratextual, promotional or ancillary” exhibit the same characteristic as primary texts themselves (Calbreath-Frasieur 2015: 234).

Marketers now draw on the journalistic prestige of “the golden age of documentary video,” as ESPN executive producer Duane Bray (2016) described the renaissance in the genre led by his film *League of Denial* on the concussion crisis in the NFL and investigative feature-length works such as the 2009 Academy

Award-winning documentary *The Cove*. Video has also converged with print in the online terrain in “Snow Fall”—inspired digital literary journalism that constitute the growing number of televisual, heavily documented nonfiction “prestige projects” (Dowling and Vogan 2015; Jacobson et al. 2016). These media products integrate sales messages into storytelling (Hernandez 2015) and occupy a liminal space between the brief advertising clip and feature-length film.

## The Industrial Context of Video Content Marketing

As Mara Einstein (2016) has demonstrated, pop-up and banner advertising has yielded to native advertising and content marketing. The proliferation of branded documentaries coincided with an upsurge in multimedia digital long-form journalism online, which became a means of promoting brands of news organizations, from *Sports Illustrated* to the *New York Times*, as well as cable television companies such as Animal Planet. These products, beginning with the *Times’* “Snow Fall,” function largely like interactive documentary films allowing users access to primary and secondary sources from data visualizations, animated maps, and film clips to scanned-in photographs and cancelled checks. They also function as advertisements for their parent companies, as evidenced by Animal Planet’s “Blood and Water,” which won an Addy for best digital advertisement and a Webby for best multimedia storytelling in 2014. The two awards epitomize the trend toward the hybridization of editorial and advertising in online media products (Dowling and Vogan 2015). The current hybridization of editorial and advertising is an extension of a longer history of the conflation of commercial advertising and entertainment on television (Deerey 2004: 1). Early programs functioned as both marketing vehicles and attracted audiences for spot advertisers (Kim 2002, 2004).

Now with their own original content published on YouTube, corporate entities make for strange bedfellows with amateurs and alternative grassroots media-production traditions that gave rise to video blogging (Banet-Weiser 2012). Originally designed to facilitate communities of amateur videographers, YouTube now hosts videos made with the quality of first-run feature films. Higher production standards have transformed the platform into “a place to consume videos (as if it were a broadcast channel)” where users increasingly “do not see themselves as having any real stakes in its community-like functions [as] a meeting ground where multiple subcultures intersect” (Burgess and Green 2009; Jenkins et al. 2016: 26–27). This rising use of YouTube as a broadcast channel for passive consumption is precipitated by the growing number of branded content videos available, most of which are longer and more immersive than those of their amateur noncommercial counterparts. Banet-Weiser (2012) aptly notes that professional and amateur YouTubers increasingly look similar and “feel as if they are part of the same system” (214). The increasing presence of corporate entities in amateur spaces does not necessarily eventuate in a “forced

march toward corporate cooptation” according to the prevailing discourse of “selling out” that demonizes commercial media (Banet-Weiser 2012: 214). Instead, brand culture is more ambivalent, capable of reinventing media forms and advocating progressive political agendas through radical hybridization and alternative marketing. Yet Chipotle’s video documentary about its business model strained too hard in this direction, advocating a utopian ideal at the nexus of artistic creativity and environmental activism according to the principle that progressive politics are incongruous with corporate agendas. Viewers found this disingenuous and reacted negatively in their online commentary. Rather than moralize the debate, this research is interested instead in providing the industrial context for branded documentary marketing and repurposing. Caldwell’s (2006) point that “the industry is far more than a hardened corporate bunker bent on homogenizing dominance choking off change” deserves underscoring (107). Blunt dichotomies—inside/outside, dominant/subjugated—of earlier theories associated with Theodore Adorno and the Frankfurt school evacuate nuanced understandings of corporate media’s relation to fringe culture. When advertising is masked, the impartiality of journalism is compromised and public life becomes subject to commercialization, as Einstein (2016) points out. Companies risk losing consumer loyalty if the branded content appears wilfully deceptive, as several discerning viewers (profiled in the final section) of Chipotle’s Netflix documentary illustrate.

In line with the rising broadcast function—viewers can now binge watch branded content such as five twelve-episode seasons of *Salomon Running TV* in much greater variety than just ten years ago—YouTube adjusted its ranking algorithm in late 2012 to be driven by time on page rather than clicks (Robertson 2014). With the new premium for advertising moving clearly toward time on page rather than clicks, companies have now sought longer immersive advertising content with the feel of an involving journalistic documentary video. The rise of content marketing directly caters to internet users’ demand for free content. From 2013 through 2014 content marketing effectively circumvented a market undergoing a backlash against traditional advertising. That period marked a dramatic 70% rise in the use of AdBlock Plus, the service that screens display ads for web users (Blanchfield 2014). The skyrocketing use of AdBlock precipitated a crisis for online marketers, who discovered that among their unblocked display ads 31% on average were not viewed. As little as 7% were seen by end users in the worst cases, explaining the alarmingly low 0.05% clickthrough rate for display ads (Lipsman 2012). As tablet use expanded, digital longform made its debut (Zickuhr 2013). The decline of banner and pop-up advertising online has elevated the importance of content (Pulizzi 2012; Cole and Greer 2013; Manjoo 2014).

This shift played directly into the hands of content marketers’ investment in developing textured pieces ideal for immersive mobile phone and tablet viewing. Marketers did not overlook how their branded content could circulate through social media as sharable markers of prestige. Digital documentaries’ reach for

prestige caters to Facebook users' pattern of one-upmanship that feeds drama, oversharing, narcissism, and social envy (Jenkins et al. 2016: 55). Social media posts tend to be biased by a desire to look good (Baym 2015: 133). Gathering likes through the sharing of online videos enables the expression of cultural identity through self-performance structured around presenting a "face" through the "information game" (Papacharissi 2009: 210). The expression of cultural identity is achieved through contacts (Jenkins et al. 2016), each of whom signals "inferences about tastes, social habits, routines, and character," either elevating or lowering one's status within the network (Papacharissi 2009: 212).

As they circulate on social media, branded documentaries are particularly conducive to "taste statements," as defined by Papacharissi (2009), that enable the expression of cultural identity through material things. They are potentially more effective than brief news items or humorous videos at expressing sharers' values. By evoking a lifestyle within a particular "taste culture," branded documentaries enable users to display their videos the way the members of *Goodreads* display their book lists: as a form of self-presentation designed "to adopt a specific taste ethos and separate themselves from those with differences in matters of taste" (Papacharissi 2009: 212). Liu's (2007) observation that social network profiles encourage such self-performances through carefully curated selections of interests, likes and dislikes, preferences, and affiliations is useful in understanding the marketers' subjects, styles, and production values of these pieces. Crucial to the appeal of these products is that they mute the sales message while emphasizing broader cultural points of interest. Each does not present itself immediately as an "advertisement" so much as a well-made documentary video on a fascinating subject with wider social implications.

Given YouTube's recalibrated ranking algorithm, along with the immersive habits of tablet users, time on page represents "a clear departure from the dominant business model in online journalism, which has been driven by advertising revenue based on page views" (Ray 2013: 439). The new premium on content has now given rise to brand journalism, "custom content," and "custom publishing," marking an industry shift in which "companies hope to build trust using the relative power and credibility of editorial content, often seen as more 'pure' than advertising" (Cole and Greer 2013: 673–674). With such emphasis on original editorial content, video content marketing shares the new digital magazine genre's focus on alternative lifestyles, literary subjects, longform journalism, and new artists. Its polish is a direct appeal to journalistic quality as well as creativity that challenges convention to the point of eccentricity. These products attempt to appear "more interested in new or alternative ideas than making money," as evidenced by *The Ride Journal* (Stam 2014: 91).

Content marketing via longform documentary video is particularly well suited to nuanced articulations of lifestyle brands. Banet-Weiser (2012) argues that lifestyle brands draw together intimate publics through a "shared world view and an emotional connection bound by a common historical experience"

(219). Lifestyle brands not only connect consumers with their values, but also can fill an ethical void—which can take on philosophical, political, and spiritual valences—in cultures in which value systems are unstable and no longer clearly defined (Einstein 2016: 130). With varying success, each of the following case studies deploy elaborate expressions of lifestyle brands communicating a coherent credo from the discipline and training of Kendo (via the Jedi Knight) to the local food environmentalist movement to trail running.

### ESPN's Promotional Documentary for *Star Wars*

Two months prior to the December 2015 premier of the thirty-minute *SC Features Star Wars: Evolution of the Lightsaber Duel* (Figure 4.1), ESPN had already begun its promotional campaign for the release of *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*. At halftime of ESPN's coverage of the October 19 National Football League (NFL) game between the New York Giants and the Philadelphia Eagles, teams representing two of the NFL's largest markets, the trailer for the film debuted. Tickets for the premier went on sale immediately after the game. Monday Night Football in the heart of fall draws one of television's largest audiences of the year. The unveiling of the first full-length trailer for the film through this venue upstaged the game itself. Indeed, ratings for the game, which had little impact on the NFL playoff picture, were extraordinary. Up until this game, ESPN had been earning an 8.4 household rating of 13.45 million viewers. The average rating for the duration of the game exceeded that mark with an 8.7 Nielsen rating. But the cable channel's viewership for the show skyrocketed precisely during halftime when the trailer aired, reaching 10.5 with roughly 17 million viewers. This unleashed the ticket-selling frenzy for



FIGURE 4.1 *Evolution of the Lightsaber Duel*, ESPN, 2015

the film that extended through its opening in late December (James 2015). This square-peg-in-round-hole corporate synergy mixing sports and science fiction is also visible in ESPN's partnership with Marvel films to create comic book covers for the biggest matchups of opening day of the 2016 college football season (Vardeman 2016). Audiences bought this hybridity just as they had the *Star Wars* promotion on Monday Night Football.

The halftime debut of the trailer marked the first of three world premier events presented by ESPN on behalf of its owner, the Walt Disney Company. Viewers of the trailer were exposed to familiar *Star Wars* characters and motifs, including Chewbacca, R2D2, and an aging Han Solo and Princess Leia, setting the stage for ESPN's journalistic promotion two months later in its documentary video hosted by Mark Hamill. ESPN capitalized on its massive NFL audience to draw audience interest not only in the coming film, but as a prelude to its own behind-the-scenes documentary. Most viewers tuning in to the December *Star Wars: Evolution of the Lightsaber Duel* three days prior to the world premier of the film likely included many of the nearly 17 million who saw the October trailer on the same channel. ESPN viewers thus received a two-part promotional primer for *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, the first a theatrical and nostalgic return to the iconic elements that first defined popular cinema in 1977, the second a special on the lightsaber, and the third the film itself. This campaign on behalf of first a movie trailer and then a making-of documentary raises the status of industrial paratexts to primary television texts, each spawning its own promotional apparatus. The trailer debut in effect became a media event in and of itself, relegating the NFL game on which it was aired to a secondary text to its status as headlining event. This epitomizes Caldwell's (2006) concept of "repurposing" and industrial marketing whereby secondary texts of a movie trailer become the headlining event. Further, the elaborate promotion of the trailer's release indicates not only that there is "no easy delineation between primary and ancillary texts" according to traditional definitions (Calbreath-Frasieur 2015), but also that ancillary promotional materials should more accurately be understood as primary if they include original creative content and unique narrative material (222).

Three press releases therefore generated three separate and carefully timed waves of unprecedented media attention for *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*. The documentary was part of a deftly orchestrated strategy to heighten the dramatic impact of Hamill's entrance into the public eye by withholding it until the eleventh hour before the film's release. His conspicuous absence from both the trailer and movie poster prompted one journalist to ask whether he was "one of the mysterious cloaked figures whose faces are obscured" in the trailer, and "What is the story with that?" (Rottenberg 2015). This strategic omission drove online discussion online to focus less on the aging Luke Skywalker and more on the racial implications of his replacement by John Boyega, the actor who is black and plays the role of Finn, a defector from the ranks of the evil stormtroopers. Racist backlash against the casting of Boyega as the protagonist

erupted online, prompting a countermovement against the trolls on Twitter led by Ava DuVernay, creator of the #CelebrateStarWarsVII hashtag (Woerner 2015). With the internet buzzing, and real-life forces of good and evil clashing in a savage racially charged melee, audiences had already invested themselves financially and ideologically in the film long before its release. In essence, they had heeded the first words of the trailer, “The Force, it’s calling you. Just let it in” (*Star Wars* 2015).

By withholding Hamill’s appearance from publicity trailers and posters for the film, the Walt Disney Company allowed audiences to discuss and dissect their promotional material, as well as the implications of a black replacement for Luke Skywalker. In the process, they became accustomed to, and speculated about, new characters introduced in the trailer such as the desert scavenger Rey, played by Daisy Ridley. Significantly, the last image of the trailer is of a lightsaber duel, the only one featured in the two-and-a-half-minute preview whose action sequences are dedicated mainly to spaceships engaged in aerial dogfights. Advance publicity therefore could focus on aspects either muted or missing altogether from the trailer, increasing demand for the ESPN premier. Hamill’s name thus appeared in headlines—typically as the first words—of nearly every story following ESPN’s press release announcing the documentary. By casting Hamill as the documentary’s narrator, Disney and LucasFilm carefully engineered the piece to stoke nostalgia for the film’s past without further complicating audience anticipation of the narrative through the introduction of new characters.

Industrially, Hamill’s unveiling as narrator of *Star Wars: Evolution of the Lightsaber Duel* heightened the significance of the paratextual making-of documentary to the status of primary television text. Culturally, it signaled a look back at the franchise’s past via its most iconic combat scenes that celebrate the human form and athleticism rather than clashes between spacecraft that highlight technology. The documentary delivers a behind-the-scenes exploration by way of interviews with choreographers, fencing specialists, and actors, examining the staging and training for the battle scenes. Lightsaber duels from *Star Wars* films, according to Craig Lazarus, ESPN Vice President of *SportsCenter & News, Storytelling Units*, “are some of cinema’s most recognizable battle scenes and an iconic part of the most popular movie franchise of all time” (Hall 2015). The piece delves into the Japanese sport of kendo, an ancient form of two-handed fencing with bamboo sticks. In order to illustrate the inspiration for Jedi Knight training as depicted in the films, ESPN traveled to report on the 2015 Kendo World Championships in Japan. Interviews revealed the larger core ethos of discipline, self-trust, and physical fitness behind the practice. The *Star Wars* franchise’s persistent theme of spirituality and wisdom draws on Japanese martial arts culture, along with its larger philosophical perspective (Lyden 2000; Wilkinson 2000).

Kendo metamorphoses into Western commodity as a lifestyle brand, one that establishes the principles for a worldview poised to fill a religious void in contemporary culture (Einstein 2016). The duel’s emphasis on discipline, form,

athleticism, and mental control translate to fluid, easily trackable clashes on screen. Inner calm and supreme confidence in one's instincts constitutes that ethos as dramatized by Obi Wan's insistence that Luke train with the eye shield of his helmet down. This nuanced discipline "balances mind and body," as evidenced by the fact that kendo's highest levels are only attainable after the age of 46 (Garber 2015). This would explain the deft swordsmanship of an old man like Obi Wan and the uncanny skill of the diminutive Yoda, a paragon of aged wisdom. "It's honor. It's balance. It's justice," the documentary intones. "Kendo is everything that Jedi are" (ESPN 2015).

Such cross-cultural edification—all within ESPN's realm of sport—sets up the sales message. In the closing minutes, the camera returns to a black-leather-jacketed Mark Hamill on a dark stage. No longer clad in the white cotton Asiatic robes of his former character, he cuts a figure both darker and more seasoned, if not weathered and morose. As the camera closes in, he declares, "*Star Wars: The Force Awakens* is in theatres Friday. The character Finn," he says brandishing a deactivated lightsaber, "is the latest to wield a lightsaber," in effect passing the baton to him as the new Luke Skywalker. He then alludes to Finn as the latest heir to carry on "a celebrated history that includes Obi Wan Kenobi, Annakin Skywalker, and his son," opening his arms in self-reference, "a kid named Luke" (ESPN 2015). (Of course, this was misdirection, as Finn only holds a lightsaber once in the movie, largely by accident; Rey is perhaps the true heir apparent.) The documentary thus ends with the textbook content marketing strategy, one deployed by 49% of the Google Small Business online community, of "telling a story before the sales message" (Lehu 2007; Hernandez 2015; Einstein 2016). In this case, that story is the history and creative sourcing of the lightsaber duel, and the sales message is the announcement of the film release. As sharable video on social media, the documentary not only whets the appetite of *Star Wars* fans, but functions as an emblem of prestige bearing the cultural sophistication of kendo and its ethic of wisdom, which honors age, experience, and balance between mind and body.

### **Chipotle's Video Autobiography and Salomon's *On the Road***

Building on the critical and commercial success of Chipotle's 3.5-minute 2013 film *The Scarecrow*—an award-winning work praised as innovative marketing and a beautiful work of art (Roberts 2013)—*Inside: Chipotle* (Figure 4.2), a content marketing film on the origins and inside workings of the fast food company, originally appeared under the increasingly popular category of documentaries on Netflix. Framed in this manner, it appears to be editorial content. ESPN deployed a similar tactic by airing its promotional piece as a special alongside its regular programming. Just as only ESPN subscribers were allowed to view the debut of its documentary, posted free online thereafter, *Inside: Chipotle* was originally restricted to Netflix subscribers. Bloomberg, the producer of the video, then posted it on YouTube for free under the altered name *Behind the Counter*.



**FIGURE 4.2** *Inside: Chipotle*, Netflix, 2014

The genre of the piece resonates with the open-source movement online that has given rise in the film industry to an increasing number of paratextual shorts opening up Hollywood's backstage world to viewers (Caldwell 2006: 165). The most visible entry in this genre is the “making-of” documentary, a more rigorously documented and edited form than directors’ blogs. ESPN and Chipotle’s videos fit precisely into this paratextual behind-the-scenes/making-of genre, but migrate into spaces typically reserved for primary texts. *Hearts of Darkness*, on the harrowing making of Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now*, was among the first entries into the ranks of primary text from the genre as a first-run Hollywood film. Later the genre would hybridize and reemerge in a dizzying variety of forms including mockumentaries such as the comedy *Quagmire*, a fictional documentary of a failed film production. The making-of documentary has thus provided the template for a range of media products from nonfictional first-run film (*Hearts of Darkness*) and fictional comedy (*Quagmire*) to sports features on cable television (*Evolution of the Lightsaber Duel*) and the Netflix *Inside* business series.

The promotional tone of the opening lines of Chipotle’s piece inadvertently discloses the function of this video as an advertisement drawing on the runaway popularity of Netflix documentaries as well as cooking shows such as *Chef’s Table* and *The Mind of a Chef*: “with the right ingredients, speed, quality, leadership, Chipotle has reinvented the fast food business” (Chipotle 2015). The Mexican grill appears only in positive light, as the film traces the franchise’s rise from humble origins through dedication to wholesome values that paved its path to success. Absent from the video are behind-the-scenes struggles and contested executive decisions. Its lack of journalistic cunning is evidenced in the

conciliatory line of questions posed to Steve Ells, which was clearly designed to reinforce the company’s image. Not only does the brand’s reputation suffer when the piece’s advertising objective becomes apparent, its journalistic pretensions as editorial content are also undermined. There is a direct correlation between the perceived intent of a media product as advertising and its integrity: as “audiences perceive a publication as more commercial, credibility ratings dropped” (Lehu 2007; Cole and Greer 2013: 674).

Through “untraditional marketing methods,” says one of Chipotle’s executives, “we don’t use common advertising techniques to announce our new menu items,” but instead “use alternative ways of telling our story” (Chipotle 2015). Chipotle’s Netflix documentary is just one content marketing method for such storytelling. Another is Chipotle’s branded four-part web series, *Farmed and Dangerous*. Shot in Los Angeles, the series centers on “a likeable but misguided group of people whose job it is to spin the most egregious aspects of industrialized agriculture in a positive way so that it looks good for consumers” (Massar 2013). This comedy ostensibly is a parody of the “Big Ag” and “Big Food” practices of its competitors, who largely rely on industrialized agriculture to cut production costs and increase revenue. The most conspicuous of Chipotle’s targets in the satire is McDonald’s, which ironically also has a content marketing video produced by Bloomberg titled *Inside: McDonald’s*. The *Inside* documentaries comprise a Netflix original series of twenty-minute videos that all bear the unmistakable stamp of brand amplification under the mantle of behind-the-scenes documentaries showing the business side of multinational corporations such as LinkedIn.

Netflix has leveraged editorial templates to promote its brand through similar native advertising tactics, as the company commissioned the *New York Times* to create content to promote its original series *Orange is the New Black*. As the first corporate entity to debut on the *Times’* new native advertising site (bearing the label PAID POST), Netflix leveraged legacy media storytelling for the campaign. The paidpost.nytimes.com URL and the site’s branding—flanking the Netflix logo centered at the bottom of the site are the *Times’* “Brand Studio” and the *Orange is the New Black* emblems—reflect the new deregulated media ecosystem of multi-brand ownership synergy (Lehu 2007; Einstein 2016: 97). Chipotle similarly entered respected editorial space by commissioning the *Huffington Post* to create a department on the site called “Food for Thought” to advertise their “Farmed and Dangerous” web series. The subject matter, mainly focusing on farming and sustainability, was left to the discretion of Chipotle, while final editorial control was in the hands of the *Huffington Post* (Einstein 2016: 119–120). ESPN, by comparison, used its own website to post reviews and other paratexts in support of their own *Star Wars* documentary.

The framing of the Chipotle video as narrated documentary journalism positions the company as an appealing farm-to-table alternative to restaurants depending on industrialized agriculture for its products. The first franchise opened in Denver in 1993 with plywood and barn metal interior—not for the

sake of fashionably sounding the store's farm-to-table motif, he insists, but to save costs. This "built environment *unintentionally* said a lot about the brand and the food we were serving" (Chipotle 2015). Ells, however, actually appointed his friend Mark Crumpacker (2013), an MFA in creative design from Yale University, to orchestrate the interior design. Significantly, Crumpacker's (2013) farm-themed interior was devised as a key component of the blueprint for Chipotle's larger brand identity Ells had commissioned him to assemble.

Whereas Chipotle's content marketing documentary showcases its lifestyle brand through its allegedly progressive farming and culinary ethos, Salomon's *On the Road* delves deeper into literary and religious culture to assemble the philosophical foundation of its lifestyle brand. With its opening sequence of grainy black-and-white archival footage of San Francisco in the 1950s alternating between breathtaking aerial footage of the Golden Gate Bridge blanketed in fog, Salomon's twenty-minute advertisement for their running shoe brand immediately appears as an homage to Jack Kerouac's famous 1957 Beatnik novel of the same title. Rickey Gates, a mustachioed thirty-two-year-old, begins the film narrative with a reflective voiceover ruminating, with long pauses to suggest the depth of his thought, on nothing less than the meaning of life. Kerouac's "own journey through post-Whitman America to FIND that America and to FIND the inherent goodness" (Leland 2007: 17) parallels that of Gates. Gates is cast as an exemplar of the antimaterialist principle of the Salomon lifestyle brand rooted in radical individualism. Like Kerouac, who affirms that he "went roaming about the country in search of God ... and found him," Gates has achieved enlightenment according to the documentary's *mise-en-scène* (Leland 2007: 17). The journey continues, he says, "as I continue to find myself asking what makes us happy as human beings" (Salomon 2014). His minimalist lifestyle rejects notions of happiness that depend on the acquisition of material things beyond necessities. Running shoes, however, are the staple of his nomadic distance-running lifestyle. In its documentary video advertisements, New Balance has similarly positioned its minimalist products according to this anti-materialist framing of distance running (Haman and Dowling 2015).

*On the Road* reveals its product just after the four-minute mark of the video. Gates's red Salomon running shoes obsequiously fill the screen for a lingering moment before he speeds off to his next destination (Salomon 2014). Both visually and verbally implicit, the sales message remains subtle. When researchers showed the video to ninety undergraduate students at a Big Ten university, few were capable of identifying the documentary as an advertisement without prompts highlighting strategic product placement. In the culminating sequence, Gates bounds through the forest as low-angle shots capture him soaring through trees shot through with shafts of sunlight (Salomon 2014). Such zeal inspired the video's small yet devout following, which showed no resentment or concern for the integration of marketing into its proselytizing on behalf of the spiritual lifestyle of trail running.

## "Every Company Is a Media Company"

*On the Road* was one of the most widely shared of the company's online TV series, registering 119,074 views, many from the 80,710 YouTube subscribers to Salomon Running TV (now in its fifth season). "What an inspirational short movie—thank you so much Salomon!" one representative viewer posted, confessing she had seen the film over 100 times (Salomon 2014). Demand for the soundtrack prompted Salomon to make it available on iTunes as the EP *On the Road: Signpost*. However tiny by comparison to ESPN's 1,163,666 views of its *Star Wars* documentary, Salomon's enthusiastic audience epitomizes the loyal following sought by niche longtail marketers. *On the Road* is so profoundly in tune with its demographic that the advertisement's exuberant reception rivals that of its non-branded endurance sport documentary counterparts on Netflix. With over 100 times as many posts as Salomon, ESPN's 3,007 comments on its video represent the mass-market fan base for *Star Wars*, with only one of those commentators sensing that a commercial motive was driving the piece. "Looks like one big commercial for Kendo," one viewer noted, accurately detecting the piece's promotional rhetoric despite misidentifying the sales item (ESPN 2015).

The middle ground between these two videos was Chipotle, which garnered 454,680 views, approximately half of ESPN's audience of 1 million-plus and roughly five times Salomon's 100,000-plus viewers. Significantly, the 211 dislikes of Chipotle was high compared to 233 dislikes for ESPN for more than double the views and no dislikes for the small Salomon audience. Chipotle's dislikes represented a larger portion than those of Salomon and ESPN combined. One viewer commented that the restaurant was "just another soulless corporation not interested in health," and another registered skepticism toward Chipotle's attempt to distance itself from the mainstream fast food industry. She noted, "Chipotle, and all fast food restaurants, are not interested in healthy food. It's all about money" (Chipotle 2015). One online commentator objected to the appearance of the video as a Netflix Originals documentary. He identified the disingenuousness of the video, asking, "Was this 22 minute piece on Chipotle a true documentary, or just a glorified advertisement?" Its superficiality evokes the feel of "a one-off TV infomercial" rather than an inside documentary offering an objective perspective of the franchise (Dyer 1982; Gheesling 2014).

ESPN, Chipotle, and Salomon have turned to the documentary online video as a major focus of their content marketing campaigns. ESPN has leveraged its cable television format for "special programming" to promote *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* as part of an elaborate publicity campaign. By emphasizing the martial arts origins of lightsaber battles in the Japanese sport of kendo, ESPN pitched the film to its vast sports audience, in the process exoticizing Eastern spirituality to appeal to Western tastes (Kniazeva 2015). Chipotle has leveraged the new food movement and backlash against GMOs to establish its lifestyle brand through its Bloomberg-produced documentary. ESPN and Chipotle first

presented their videos as editorial content available by subscription (to the cable station for the former, and Netflix for the latter). Both films now appear free online. By contrast, Salomon released its documentary, which is part of a larger series, free on the web. In each, journalistic storytelling sets up the sales message according to the definition of content marketing (Pulizzi 2012; Basney 2014; Meyer 2014; Trimble 2014; Hernandez 2015) in a sharable media product designed to reflect credit and prestige upon the sharer. These pieces represent innovation in content marketing toward online documentary video produced as longform digital prestige projects so well disguised as editorial content that they can command viewer payment. Along with T Brand, the *New York Times'* content marketing and native advertising production department, CNN's 2015 announcement of its plan to produce content for advertisers indicates the embrace of content marketing by the media industry's most credible news organizations. Non-media companies such as Mercedes Benz have widely invested in content marketing and native advertising on digital platforms such as *Forbes*. As Clay Shirky has observed, "every company is a media company," because, regardless of industry, all are "tasked with communicating internally to their own employees, as well as gathering and distributing information to external audiences" (Stein 2009).

The cases examined in this chapter illustrate how "content marketing is moving toward a Zen state of storytelling" (Hadden 2016). As the first two cases indicate, production values are now high enough that companies are willing to demand payment from audiences to view their advertisements as primary television texts. In the broader industrial context, the cases of ESPN and Chipotle undermine the conventional assumption that advertising should be free and that high-end work should function as a loss leader in the manner of Salomon's video series. Charging viewers for advertising—in some cases edifying and entertaining—represents the latest innovation in the ongoing reinvention of advertising since the conflation of online editorial and advertising content became standard industrial practice.

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# 5

## AUDIO IMMERSION

### The Case of the Podcast

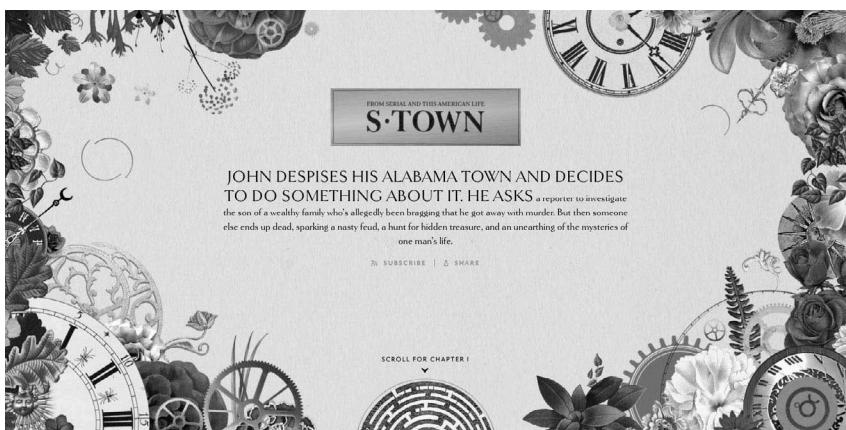
When narrator Sarah Koenig of *This American Life*'s blockbuster podcast *Serial* was asked about the pioneering feat that seemed to all but rewrite the history of immersive storytelling, she refused to acknowledge it as an unprecedented success. Episodic storytelling “is as old as Dickens,” she claimed, downplaying the role of new media technology in providing mobile audiences with increasingly frictionless access to podcasts (Raptopoulos 2014). Her analogy to Charles Dickens was apt, especially considering the Victorian author’s capacity to weave narrative yarns in weekly installments later repurposed as novels that received the rare double distinction of commercial success and critical acclaim. Season one of *Serial*, which was developed through Chicago public radio station WBEZ, was the digital age’s audio equivalent of a Dickens bestseller. Not only was it the fastest to reach 5 million iTunes downloads when it appeared in 2014, the program maintained a download rate of 500,000 per day over a year later. *Serial* ranked in the top ten for new iTunes subscriptions in four countries more than a year after release, topping the charts in the USA through August 2015 (iTunes 2017). This popular success was matched by critical recognition that included a Peabody award, unleashing a deluge of upstarts and legacy media producers into the market.

Now in “a time of bounty and greatness” characterized by its capacity to “deftly combine narrative and news” (Larson 2017b), the podcasting industry has “reached a tipping point for a medium in maturity” after its first decade of existence (Berry 2015: 170). After *Serial*, true crime podcasts like *A Killing on the Cape* and *Criminal* by Chapel Hill’s WUNC soon capitalized on audience interest in the genre. With the industry in full bloom as an art form that has “pushed journalism into unexpected places” in 2017, the producers of *Serial* exceeded their own lofty standard for immersive audio storytelling with the

release of *S-Town* (Figure 5.1) (Larson 2017b). This skyrocketing trajectory of public radio-inspired podcasting has made it the fastest-growing genre in digital publishing, one that has evolved into arguably “the most fertile ground for narrative nonfiction in English-language media” through its transcendent effect on listeners and pioneering journalistic technique (Abel 2015: 2).

With podcasting’s dramatic growth, the once staid and remote bastion of public radio now finds itself at the epicenter of the digital ecosystem. Intellectual culture, as seen in the cross-platform success of TED Talks (repurposed from YouTube for the podcast medium as *TED Talks Daily*), has migrated into popular culture through digital media, in the process raising questions about commercial media’s effect on its content. The corporate expansion of public radio broadcasting that saw NPR develop from five reporters to more than 100 during a twenty-five-year period has drawn criticism for abrogating its fringe identity as an alternative to mainstream corporate media. “NPR now boasts more news bureaus globally than the *Washington Post* or any of the other major TV networks,” attracting 30 million listeners each week (Porter 2016: 183). Porter (2016) lamented the station’s replacement of “arty faire, including daily doses of literature” with homogeneous hard news content (183). Although NPR has recently lost its distinctive—and indeed colorful—terrestrial broadcast personalities of the past such as the iconic Susan Stamberg, known for experimenting with “the audio verison of cinema verite” (Porter 2016: 187), such experimentation is now thriving online through the podcast medium, which now touts Sarah Koenig and Brian Reed among the most powerful celebrities in terms of sheer audience reach in the history of audio media.

Podcasting’s origins trace back to a Center for Public Broadcasting revenue windfall that enabled NPR to fund the immersive longform programs *All Things Considered* at two hours and *This American Life* at one hour. Ira Glass’s *This*



**FIGURE 5.1** *S-Town*, from *Serial* and *This American Life* producers, 2017

*American Life*, originally distributed on Public Radio International (later through a partnership with PRK), spawned the *Serial* experiment in documentary storytelling. After its 1995 launch, *This American Life* took four years to reach 1 million listeners on terrestrial radio, a landmark *Serial* reached in just four weeks via podcast in 2014. Glass's next major podcast project was *Invisibilia*, which attracted 2 million listeners per episode in four weeks, climbing to 5 million downloads as sharing accelerated on social media (Abel 2015: ix). Then in 2017, *S-Town* took only four days to reach the 10 million mark, shattering the previous record (Larson 2017a; Moran 2017). Podcasting's spectacular ascent is in part attributable to audience demand for noncommercial programming visible in the use of ad blocker technology, which has exploded from 30 million monthly users in 2010 to 181 million in 2015 (Rosenwald 2015). The ad-free environment of podcasts has emerged directly out of the sea change in the digital media industry toward longer more substantial content designed to captivate rather than distract audiences. The trend is evident in ad-free branding strategies online publishers have adopted in response to ad blocking (Farouk 2017). Branding now appears within longer pieces, as marketers have discovered podcasting as a potent vehicle for sponsored content (Ascierto 2017).

The sudden growth of on-demand audio for online mobile audiences has prompted public radio to confront its new role at the forefront of the digital publishing industry. In the wake of the transition from the protective enclave of terrestrial radio to the competitive scramble of digital publishing on the open web, Ira Glass proclaimed, "public radio is ready for capitalism." The statement predictably drew the ire of NPR purists who feared this new role signaled the end of public broadcasting as a noncommercial oasis of scrupulous journalism in a commercial sea of compromised and unprincipled reporting (Greiff 2015). Despite such resistance, other public radio standard-bearers echoed Glass's sentiment. Public radio icon WNYC Studios, for example, invested \$15 million in on-demand audio development to court mobile listeners, acknowledging that "we're not boutique anymore" and therefore must expand to "have enough heft in the business." Chief content officer Dean Cappello expressed the need to become a "much bigger content company" by redoubling podcasting production to prevent from ceding territory in the online mobile audio market (Cook and Sirkkunen 2013; Quah 2015). While NPR's shrinking and greying Morning Edition audience lost 20% of its terrestrial broadcast listeners under the age of fifty-five from 2010 to 2015, podcast startup Gimlet targeted millennials, including racially diverse intellectuals with programs such as "The Nod" dedicated to "exploring the stories about blackness that you don't often hear" (Larson 2017b). Gimlet's reach into this untapped market earned the company \$2 million in revenue its first year based on \$1.5 million in venture capital investments (Frank 2015). These industrial shifts have been fueled by a surge in creativity boasting arguably more range and depth of aesthetic expression for audio nonfiction narrative than any in media history.

This chapter situates the podcast medium within its industrial and technological contexts as a cultural product of public radio and immersive online storytelling. Podcasting shares with other immersive media an emphasis on richly textured narrative featuring self-reflexive gestures that expose audiences to the journalistic process of production. Unlike visual longform genres, sound and the spoken word are the essence of the medium, undermining stereotypes of online culture as dominated by images and videos to the exclusion of language-driven narrative. The diverse literacies of twenty-first-century audiences are not only visually oriented, but show a nuanced appreciation for the power of language and linear narrative. Personal and subjective approaches to storytelling, which are part of larger trends in online news, are intrinsically linked to audio (Lindgren 2016), making podcasting “the biggest growth area of journalism” (Coward 2013: 12). The high standard of quality adopted by the podcasting industry resonates with those of public radio’s foundational principles of enlightening audiences and exposing them to “voices that need to be heard” (Larson 2017a), while additionally leveraging the online ecosystem’s participatory culture to enable fresh voices new to audio media to tell their own stories. Like great literature, the more finely crafted podcasts such as Radiotopia’s *Ear Hustle* (Figure 5.2) and BBC4’s *Ideas* leave listeners “edified and invigorated, having been brought out of [themselves] … into the realm of learning and curiosity” so that they return to the present world “in a better frame of mind” equipped “to perceive the world more acutely” (Larson 2017a).

In contrast to the unidirectional one-to-many terrestrial radio broadcast model, on-demand digital audio is by nature interactive, as evidenced by the meta-*Serial* podcasts such as *Slate’s Serial Spoiler Specials* dedicated to predicting the show’s progress. Whereas pre-internet radio’s original black box production



**FIGURE 5.2** *Ear Hustle*, Radiotopia, 2017

model typically concealed creative decisions in the studio, the podcast medium fosters more interactive cultural norms according to networked participatory culture, which invites listeners into the conversation (Gillmor 2006). In online forums, blogs, and social media, *Serial* audiences weighed the testimony and even presented new evidence to determine whether Adnan Syed murdered his girlfriend Hae Min Lee and left her body in a Baltimore park in 1999.

The podcast is the latest medium since Dickens to perfect the mass appeal of serial storytelling as he had for nineteenth-century audiences. In the twentieth, radio drama's golden age of the 1930s transfixed listeners with immersive storytelling, as witnessed in Orson Welles's "War of the Worlds" hoax, which left millions spellbound. But missing from these predecessors—whose signature narrative techniques of scene setting and tension building are so clearly remediated in contemporary podcasting—is an interactive audience with instant access to visual representations of these audio stories and platforms where such material can be discussed and openly shared via social media. The activated audience is thus the immersed—and data-rich—audience in the digital age, rather than the passively transfixed ones that made up the millions whom Welles so masterfully duped.

## Immersive Audio

The lack of research on longform audio journalism (McHugh 2014; Panda 2014) is in part attributable to the relatively recent maturity of the medium reached in 2014 with *This American Life*'s release of *Serial*, which established an impressive standard arguably exceeded by the same producers three years later in 2017 with the hypnotic and lyrical *S-Town*. At the amateur level, audio production technology has evolved rapidly since 2014 with the advent of free online audio editing programs such as Audacity, which enable users to produce high-quality radio journalism without expensive editing booths and elaborate studio facilities. Smartphones are now capable of producing edited sound packages of a quality analogous to their powerful photo and video capabilities that revolutionized pro-am visual storytelling. Yet citizen-produced audio programming tends to lack the highly polished sound design of professional journalism (Wake and Bahfen 2016). The tools of professional-scale production enabling musical interludes, mixes of live interviews, and effects are capable of immersing audiences in content of one hour or more, engaged time that triples that of visual and multimedia longform. Immersive storytelling for online video that functions as content marketing, for example, are documentaries that are typically eighteen-to-twenty-three minutes long, as noted in Chapter 4. Immersive audio is not only the longest of longform media, but also extremely diverse in its repertoire of modes. Content ranges from elaborately multivalent sound design, as in *Serial*'s masterful mix of narration, recorded interviews, and musical score, to relatively minimalist, as in the *TED Talks Daily* and *99% Invisible*.

Both of these popular podcasts primed the market for *Serial* with cerebral humanistic subject matter probing causes and effects of emotion, thought, and behavior at individual and societal levels. Known in industry parlance as deep dives, such content is as intellectually challenging and philosophically subtle as it is rich in data.

The podcasting renaissance has given rise to new documentary forms such as those on *Radiolab*, which have inspired new production styles and listening practices. Audio storytelling now combines both traditional elements of news writing for longform radio with more latitude than ever for narrative creativity. Given the newness of the podcasting medium, audio content is in a state of radical experimentation, in which older conventions are reimaged for new digital design affordances. The podcast has revamped and redesigned radio in crucial ways, such as enabling asynchronous listening and amateur production. The “mobile nature of producing radio content” nonetheless builds on time-honored journalistic principles of “storytelling, newsworthiness, exceptional technical work, and a multiplicity of voices,” balancing imperatives with innovation (Wake and Bahfen 2016: 238). There are fundamental technological differences between radio and podcasting. On-demand audio is more than simply an extension of radio, as argued in early research on podcasting (Berry 2006; Menduni 2007). Content creation, even for recorded documentaries, differs significantly when prepared for delivery in a radio station rather than for posting on the web. Many radio stations have found a rich source of revenue in repackaging live content as podcasts. Significantly, the process entails more than simple repurposing, which in the print industry involved shoveling content onto news websites with little sensitivity to the different affordances and demands of the digital medium. Thus today’s best podcasts are delivered not as pale imitations of radio. Instead, as *Serial* and *S-Town* and their numerous imitators attest, virtuoso audio storytelling now showcases journalism that reveals the gaps and fissures in the interpretive and deductive process while maintaining powerful diegetic coherence.

The inspiration for *Serial* lay in seeking deeper meaning behind a fourteen-year-old murder headline, just as the *New York Times* multimedia feature “Snow Fall: Avalanche at Tunnel Creek” revisited a long-forgotten ski tragedy to probe the causes and effects, the miscalculations and miscommunications, the hubris and recklessness that precipitated the event. Podcast audiences, like those of the *New Yorker* Radio Hour produced by WNYC studios, are attracted to precisely this sort of journalistic craft that operates outside of the manic Twitter-driven hard news cycle (Ellis 2015). In 2015, the *New Yorker* offered for the first time an audio version of its venerable brand, which has set the standard for literary journalism and prose fiction for nearly a century with contributors such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and John Hershey. Its audio production, consisting of a variety of weekly profiles, storytelling, and conversations on pertinent topics of learned debate (including the humor of the Shouts and Murmers section), has

been reproduced to fit the needs of the audio medium rather than replicating its magazine content. ESPN has followed suit with its podcast of Nate Silver's highly touted *Five Thirty-Eight*, originally an independent blog that became a regular editorial column on the *New York Times* website. Silver's case points to the adaptability of commentary and analysis to cross-platform journalism, as he joins the ranks of CNN's *The Axe Files* and NPR's *Embedded NPR*, prominent entries dedicated to serious journalism in the podcasting world. Although the "boundaries between 'radio' and 'audio' may be blurred, the appetite for creative making and committed listening is strong and enthusiastic and growing more all over the world," according to Street (2012: 12–13). Although not all platforms have invested in tailoring content to the new podcast medium (Perez 2012), audio storytelling across the industry has collectively made a distinct turn toward higher levels of production, in many cases reaching virtuoso standards.

Audio and sound-based journalism not produced over radio waves lacked the power to adapt to a wide variety of mobile user preferences before the introduction of iTunes in 2005. iTunes became increasingly popular when the capabilities and functions of the iPod became available on the iPhone in 2007. This key phase in technological development epitomizes the process of media convergence in which Apple played a major role, marking the transition toward the proliferation of niche products for narrowly defined audiences. Such "long tail" marketing was the signature business model Jeff Bezos leveraged when launching Amazon, his once-fledgling online bookselling business, by marketing to niche products no matter how obscure, a method that defied the tradition of promoting bestsellers. Not only distributors but content producers that included an array of internet publishers adopted long tail marketing under the premise that a far greater diversity of products can exist online since there is no scarcity of space. The dependence on fewer popular items as the major source of revenue has now yielded to a business model invested in "the wealth of content that still exists on the infinitely thin end of the long tail," according to Berry's (2015) apt economic analysis of podcasting's growth (172).

Lifestyle journalism, formerly a peripheral niche genre that has been on the rise since the mid-twentieth century and arguably earlier, is a major factor in the skyrocketing demand for audio longform via podcast. Increasingly personalized listening habits that have grown since the advent of the smartphone are ideally suited to the shift toward lifestyle journalism, particularly its emphasis on forming a relationship with an audience through the journalist's orientation of their work toward them (Hanusch 2012). The rise of the feature is often cited as the most prevalent indicator of this shift, understood as centering on "soft news" niches such as music, gaming, and travel journalism. Now, however, hard news topics have entered the field of lifestyle journalism, so that there is a distinct hybridization between audience-oriented longform features and hard news political topics. This shift in orientation of the journalistic field toward audiences came about since the mobile revolution of the late 2000s. Methods

previously isolated to lifestyle journalism became widespread, as subjectivity and the use of dialogue, scene, setting, and plot to drive narrative entered the world of hard news politics, business, and world affairs (Hanusch 2014). The *New Yorker Radio Hour* draws on the method and scope of the print edition's features such as David Remnick's in-depth profile of Hillary Clinton months after the 2016 presidential election. Through the podcast, hard news and entertainment converge in the most potent digital publishing space beside the multimedia feature for the magazine's print content.

Immersive audio has directly benefited not only from the rise of lifestyle journalism, but also from its emphasis on audience that is so well suited to mobile journalism's user-centered interactivity. Serious nonfiction literary storytelling combines with in-depth investigative reporting in *S-Town* to deliver a Faulkner-inspired seven-part story. The single release of the complete season responds to user demand for autonomy respecting diverse media consumption practices—from episodic to binge listening—based on the Netflix model of publishing full seasons at once. In addition to catering to binge listening preferences, audience engagement ventures beyond the entertainment subjects (which Howard Cosell called the “toy department” in describing disparaging comments about sports journalism) of soft news associated with older forms of lifestyle journalism and into the arena of true crime. No longer relegated to diversionary entertainment, the podcast stands as the latest entrant in the Slow Journalism movement initiated in Britain by a quarterly print magazine aptly titled *Delayed Gratification* (Dowling 2016). *S-Town* embodies precisely the production pace of Slow Journalism, as the epic seven-part saga of a town and its most maladjusted curmudgeon takes on literary dimensions.

True crime has sharply risen in popularity, particularly Dan Zupansky's *True Murder* weekly podcast. The literary journalistic bent appears in his interviews with authors of nonfiction books on murders. The rigor of his reporting is evident in his early foray into the genre via his weekly college radio interview show in Manitoba, Canada. For the show, he delved into serious journalism, including personal interviews and extensive correspondence that amassed over 200 pages of handwritten letters with accused murderer Sidney Teerhuis (Taylor-Lehman 2017). *Trophy Kill: The “Shall We Dance?” Murder* is the 2010 book Zupansky published on the Teerhuis incident, a work that has won accolades and was instrumental in launching his current *True Murder* podcast. With over 330 episodes, his podcast, which cemented his reputation as “the godfather of true crime,” pre-dates *Serial* by four years and charted in four different countries (Taylor-Lehman 2017).

Zupansky has positioned himself in the culture in a manner similar to the situation Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* occupied in terms of engaging audiences in immersive true crime narrative. It is telling of podcasting's distinct turn toward self-reflexivity in which the reportorial process itself moves from

peripheral text to main text and even staple rhetorical convention. Nonfiction longform narrative and meta-narrative have thus become staple ingredients for meeting audience demand with increasingly sophisticated content. “New narrative and expressive forms” (Saiz 2011: 69) have emerged in the context of profound shifts in industrial protocols (Havens and Lotz 2016) leading radio stations to invest in repackaging and expanding on live content as podcasts. The industrial turn toward radical experimentation in nonfictional audio content affirms how “technological innovation must be fuelled by the transformation and creation of additional content and services and other forms of expression,” a process demanding “experimentation, imagination and creativity by professionals” (as quoted in Saiz 2011: 69). Now we enter a phase in which stations are seriously beginning to evaluate “the actual capacity of the internet to broadcast journalistic content” (Saiz 2011: 69).

## New Conventions for a New Genre

The prominence of journalism practice as a subject, theme, and process of deductive interrogation in *Serial* reflects an emerging set of genre conventions characterizing the latest podcasts. As with the multimedia feature’s artful interweaving of text and visuals, podcasting has developed a set of signature storytelling devices. The tepid reception of *Serial*’s second season reflects the discriminating taste of podcast listeners, whose refined and nuanced horizons of expectation were highly attuned to the narrative conventions and sound designs they savored in season one (Baron 2016; Moran 2017). Although the listenership for season two of *Serial* outpaced that of the first, it received a more critical response, in part for abandoning the true crime genre. The second season’s brand of investigative journalism played like equal parts open-ended psychological exploration and reflective, even brooding, profile feature. The story of deserting soldier Bowe Bergdahl disappointed many listeners expecting a mystery like that of the murder case in series one. The slow accretion of investigation into Bergdahl’s abandonment of his assigned post and subsequent capture by the Taliban lacked a conclusive denouement for many listeners. The notable backlash was “something of a cultural disappointment, at least compared to last season,” according to one reviewer (Baron 2016).

Since then *S-Town*’s record 10 million downloads distinctly propelled podcasting out of niche narrowcasting into mainstream mass media. News bulletins and sports broadcasts are forms of live radio that continue to draw listeners, proving that synchronous audio consumption has not been rendered obsolete by podcasts (Starkey 2017: 475). Given *S-Town*’s thirty-fold increase in listenership over *Serial*’s first season, podcasting can no longer be relegated to an esoteric preference of fringe audiences, whose taste is not representative of those mass-media consumers. As Collins (2010) observes of online book clubs such as the cross-platform phenomenon spawned by television talk show

icon and media mogul Oprah Winfrey, literature has become popular culture in the digital age.

In podcasting, it is no more evident than in the example of *S-Town*'s overt and self-conscious allusions to Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" that align the narrative with a literary tradition examining the more bizarre and troubled recesses of Southern culture. The podcast's main subject, John C. McLemore, who dies unexpectedly at the end of the second episode, furnished co-executive producer and host Brian Reed with the haunting Faulkner story in addition to Guy de Maupassant's "The Necklace," and Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery." His intention was to intimate to the producers the nature of his story, perhaps to guide the narrative toward more novelistic methods. Proper understanding of these frequently anthologized short stories sent a clear signal that his story was similarly engaging the self-destructive logics and "proleptic decay and decrepitude" plaguing rural and Southern culture (Larson 2017a). Taking McLemore's cue, Reed spun a yarn of psychological complexity and nuance worthy of Faulkner himself, opening *S-Town* with an extended controlling metaphor of horology for the epistemological process of uncertainty and discovery of such intimate longform journalism. Reed's approach to the audio medium was decidedly authorial and "novelistic in its aesthetic." He explained, "if *Serial* is more like a TV show, this [*S-Town*] is more like a novel. I hope that people enjoy it the way they might enjoy a book" (Larson 2017a). That keynote is built into the show's sound design, as heard in the theme song by the Zombies written for the podcast, titled "A Rose for Emily."

Here we see journalism breach the category of news altogether, ascending to the level of a genre—drawing on modernist fictional narrative as the keynote for its self-reflexive postmodern narrative—far more adept and multifaceted in providing serious reportage, cultural critique, and probing psychological intrigue. Scripted and carefully edited podcasts in this genre have roots directly in the practice of journalism, but have adopted a structure associated with documentary cinema and the novel, especially by way of narrative voice, ambient sound and music, a cast of characters established through a variety of interviewees, and a prevalence of reportorial method.

Through podcasting's rapid evolution toward sophisticated narrative, audio journalism empowered by a slower news production cycle now reaches beyond the narrow reportage of the news bulletin. The achievement of *S-Town* and others approaching its quality defies the presumption that "podcasting is perhaps more the preserve of the niche enthusiast, from the trainspotter to the electronic game player than the professional radio journalist," especially since producers of the caliber of Ira Glass have left their imprimatur of the medium. "This area of niche ... *narrowcasting*" was formerly assumed to be the domain in which "podcasting mostly appears to thrive" (Starkey 2017: 475). Podcasting's migration into mainstream media signals a key phase in the development of its relation to corporate marketing. Ira Glass's controversial claim that public radio

is prepared to compete in the free market does not imply that corporate homogeneity will flatten the ambitious eclectic spirit of its content (Greiff 2015). The BBC's historical program *In Our Time* points to precisely the sort of crafted content that commercial radio such as Clearchannel neglected in order to invest in honing musical formats with ever-more-efficient market research analytics to serve up generic playlists, standard news briefs, and increasingly uncouth morning show banter.

Although public radio's new competitive business acumen may appear to be a bleak sign of the future of journalistic longform programming, the infusion of commercial vigor has breathed new life into the form. Podcasting's evolution indicates a blurring of the boundaries between entertainment forms and politically progressive expose and advocacy journalism. In response to protectionists fearing public media's commercialization that has largely taken form through podcasting, Ira Glass assured, "I am not advocating some cartoony and stupid version of embracing capitalism." Instead he advocated "a huge middle ground, where we keep our mission and ideals" while drawing "in more money using the conventional tools of the market economy." The revenue source he was alluding to moved beyond government subsidies and grants, which have been the lifeblood of public radio since its inception. "Now, with podcast booming," he explained, "we could make more than we have in the past, and spend it on [the programming] that people turn to public radio for" (Greiff 2015). This new opportunity is more lucrative than any in public radio's past. Certainly celebrities such as Ken Burns and Garrison Keillor have launched their careers on their respective public broadcasting platforms of television documentary and radio, but no single medium to evolve out of public broadcasting has seized audiences' imagination like podcasting. Podcasting has not merely provided a means for funding public broadcasting's serious content for terrestrial radio. Instead it has begun to exhibit the characteristics of audio literature in a new genre as artful as it is responsive to journalism's mission of strengthening democracy by serving the public interest.

Public radio's roots in transparent ethical journalism are evident in today's podcast narratives. A commercial success built on strong journalistic integrity that foregrounds and scrutinizes the reporter's subjectivity has not been seen since the New Journalism movement led by Tom Wolfe, Joan Didion, and Hunter S. Thompson beginning in the 1960s (Coward 2013). New levels of intimacy have been enabled by both digital technologies and internet-inspired production culture. Terrestrial over-the-air radio's unilinear storytelling, for example, did not allow audiences to pause or move backward and forward through content (Russo 2010: 59). The capacity for sharing via social media is another innovation that enhances the intimacy of on-demand audio longform journalism, transcending a major limitation of conventional radio programming. Call-in talk shows represented the most interactive form of radio, but were limited to communication with the host to the exclusion of other listeners.

Sharing and discussing a podcast through social media, by comparison, is a deeply intimate expression that reflects on the user's identity. The nature of the content users post can profoundly influence their status within their social network. Edifying material that is also entertaining appeals to users, whose tastes in shared content are highly visible and can reflect credit upon them within their online community. Such "self-branding" via shared and recommended content is part of a complex process of online self-presentation (Baym 2015: 122–123). When podcasts are shared, the episode's storytelling prowess is spotlighted and assessed by friends in the network who expect fresh data packaged in a uniquely captivating way that at its best provides a spellbinding narrative yarn.

Podcasting's convention of intimacy not only draws on the sharing function of its audience, but also the interactivity between listeners and producers. Jenkins (2006) has described the rise of participatory culture among reality TV fans of *Survivor*, who banded together in online networks to anticipate, and thus spoil, future episodes of the show. Instead of sabotaging production, podcast audiences typically contribute to it, suggesting crucial leads and evidence in the reporting process, thus raising storytelling to new heights. Interactivity, transparency in the production process, and access to journalists are fundamental features of the emerging culture of digital news (Eide 2016). The interactive model of podcasting is shared by former Planet Money host Stephen Henn, who departed from NPR precisely to capitalize on new media's capacity to listen to its audience. Just as political movements now leverage listening as a key component for mobilizing grassroots constituents through digital media (Karpf 2016), Henn has invested in a form of digital radio that is "personalized ... social and ubiquitous," one that "would listen and let the audience talk back" (2016).

The internet has not only revolutionized radio through the interactivity of podcasting, it has also made audio storytelling more visual than ever. Radio's old invisibility is now more visible than ever, as podcasts have become live entertainment, as evidenced by *The Nerdist* tour and video recorded content. Podcasting's transmediation has reached readers, as seen in the graphic art comic *Out on the Wire* (Abel 2015), and publication of *S-Town*'s full transcript in ad-free digital formatting for mobile devices. The online publication of podcast transcripts testifies to the lasting value of audio storytelling, adding an enduring quality missing from previous generations on on-air broadcasting. Scripts were of course read when Orson Wells horrified audiences with his *War of the Worlds* broadcast and when Amos and Andy acted out their comic roles to millions of listeners during the mid-twentieth century. Those transcripts, however, were never published simultaneous to the shows themselves. With digitally published transcripts, podcasting takes on a distinctly literary character, one that enables readers to savor the cadences and nuances of the literary art of immersive audio in written form. Scholarly research into transmedial narratology has yet to seriously consider podcasting among the discipline's purview that typically

consists of television, film, comics, and novels (Thon 2016). Podcast fans want story, and story is language shaped into narrative.

As audience increasingly becomes the focus of digital longform journalism, intimacy has become a crucial convention in immersive storytelling. Intimacy, however, was an issue that raised concerns that the ethic of objectivity in journalism was compromised when *Serial* narrator Sarah Koenig openly disclosed her own biases and intuitions, confessing that they directly shaped her reporting process. The format of telling “one story, week by week” prompted Koenig and her producers to court intimacy by creating the type of intense suspense commonly associated with live breaking news. Heightening the sense of anticipation regarding how the story would unfold, Koenig openly speculates regarding possible outcomes, reminding her readers that her assumptions could be wrong. One episode ends precisely in the mode of the cliff-hanger established by fictional serial radio dramas. Indeed, this has become a staple convention of the genre, whereby episodes finish as a simultaneous caesura and enjambment, a syntactical pause that naturally draws the narrative forward. The speed with which new episodes of *Serial* were consumed—usually within twenty-four hours of being posted—reflects the intensity of audience anticipation for the release of each new installment (Berry 2015: 174).

Interestingly, despite the asynchronous time-shifted autonomous consumption built into the podcast medium, listeners’ knowledge of the next episode’s posting inspired synchronized consumption through listening parties promoted and organized on social media. Although on-demand listening ideally serves the rising numbers of users who access podcasts on smartphones, live listening parties taking place off-line function like *The Nerdist* podcast shows attended by live audiences that enable “listeners to come together in a physical setting to enjoy a similar (even heightened) experience of collective listening” (Edmond 2015: 6). Such live gatherings that synchronize listening not only remediate live broadcast qualities of the past, they share much with the emergence of new events that revert solitary media consumption into a shared public ritual. Synchronized “marathon” readings of classics such as Melville’s *Moby-Dick* and Joyce’s *Ulysses*, for example, were originally print-only affairs that became widely accessible online through streaming video in 2010. Such events function much like podcasts, whose listening parties have become literary events for mobile users. Mobile devices are the overwhelming preference for podcast listeners, 69% of whom requested their podcasts from smartphones compared to 31% laptop and desktop users according to an Edison survey (as cited in Mitchell et al. 2016: 65).

The distinctive conventions of podcast storytelling are perhaps nowhere more apparent than in satires. Certainly the earnest staginess of the storytelling with the signature high piano notes rhythmically playing in the background constitute easy targets for comedians such as Will Stephen and SNL’s Cecily Strong, who skewer Koenig’s tendency to suspend judgment by questioning the

minutiae of mundane evidence and obvious situations in order to heighten suspense. One parody even sends up the show's pioneering use of media technology by proclaiming the next episode will be made specifically for the iPad, thus heralding the first ever "podcast," a new medium destined to take the internet by storm (Laudiero 2014). Others have more seriously argued that the transformation of nonfiction content into dramatic narrative compromises journalistic standards. Yet as Amditis point out, "there is nothing inherently wrong with using drama and other compelling narrative devices to draw in and retain your audience." Whereas the Society of Professional Journalists' code of ethics notes that it is "unethical to expose an audience to potentially unfounded or misleading information, even if it is couched in plausible deniability or disclaimers," Koenig's transparent approach honors the sophisticated literacies of her digital audience by interrogating the data and its sources (Amditis 2016).

A long tradition of narrative nonfictional storytelling as an alternative to breaking news reportage traces back at least as far as Henry David Thoreau, who similarly engaged in artful literary techniques in the nineteenth century to immerse readers both critically and imaginatively (Canada 2011). Unique perspectives and investigations that reach behind the headlines run counter to what Hemingway called the "telegraph-ese" of mid-twentieth-century news writing. Podcasts have evolved away from the proverbial inverted pyramid's clipped and truncated style, which isolates the story's most important information to the first lines. Unlike digital technology that affords journalists virtually unlimited space, stories sent over the wire via telegraph necessitated the abbreviated inverted pyramid form in part due to limitations unique to the telegraph wire signals that threatened to cut off stories. The inverted pyramid enabled editors to run stories regardless of how much they had lost in the transmission of the signal, unlike feature leads which would leave readers guessing as to the outcome of the event. Unlike terrestrial radio, podcasts are free of time limits restricting the size of the cast of interviewees, characters that often explicate concepts and reinforce thematic purpose. In the right editorial hands, a greater range of diverse perspectives can allow for more journalistic balance in the narrative (Levin 2014).

## The Walled Garden as Audio Cognitive Container

Enclosed app environments on mobile devices known as "walled gardens" typically are understood as visual media for mobile devices. Designed to maintain user attention, they provide a cognitive container that concentrates attention within the enclosed environment rather than scattering it onto the web via hyperlinks (Dowling and Vogan 2015). Just as "users often stay within the 'walled gardens' of apps" on smartphones and tablets (Schroeder 2018: 88), podcast listeners tend to remain engrossed for extended periods. This is in part because longform audio content is free of both competing visual stimuli and

commercial interruption. Listeners receive audio content through a distraction-free medium that encourages their absorption in it; there is no portal to the open web via hyperlinks or other visual incentives to leave it. Immersion and the sense of presence in podcasting are effects of being in an environment that guides attention through a coherent set of audio stimuli but does not force it. Podcasting's immersive quality has not been examined for its power to render a sense of presence ("being there") in a virtual environment. Presence studies instead focus on augmented reality through highly visual and interactive media such as 360 video and virtual reality experiences requiring headsets. Yet the podcast medium is perhaps more powerful in rendering immersive virtual worlds. It guides but does not force sensory perception, enabling focus on the virtual audio environment to the exclusion of the unrelated stimuli of the physical location.

Early research by the US Army found "the perception of being present in a remote operations task or a virtual environment (VE) requires the ability to focus on one meaningful set of stimuli (in the VE) to the exclusion of unrelated stimuli (the physical location)." The key to immersion "is that the experience of presence is based in the continuities, connectedness, and coherence of the stimulus flow." Broad awareness of "the entire task environment" and an understanding of what to filter out and what to focus on are correlated to high levels of perceived presence (Witmer and Singer 1998: 226). During podcast listening, unrelated visual stimuli in the immediate physical environment—during exercise, driving, walking, or doing yard work—is perceived yet cognitively filtered in order to concentrate attention on the podcast narrative.

Immersive audio is a potent vehicle of narrative transportation from the listener's immediate physical surroundings. "The coherence of the VE," as in absorbing podcast content, "and the stimuli thus enable the focusing of attention, but does not force that on the experiencer." In this sense, "the concept of enabling without forcing gives us the distinction between the experience of presence and the immersive factors that can support the experience." Indeed, listeners must attend before they can enter the audio story world, and they must be aware of its own broad spectrum of stimuli in its sound design in order to sort false leads from key evidence and weigh the testimony of interviewees as in the true crime genre. Audio can recreate crime scenes, for example, with similar effects to virtual reality, whereby "when experiencing a novel environment, people are typically more aroused and broadly focused on the tasks to be performed," and that such "broad focus is necessary for a high level of presence in a virtual environment." Audio immersion operates the same way, as "the novelty, immediacy, and uniqueness of the experience requires the broad focusing of attention on all aspects of the environment" (Witmer and Singer 1998: 226).

Immersed in this audio "walled garden," podcast listeners are ostensibly online, yet are not prompted to navigate the internet in such a manner that

conforms to their perspective, as in online behavior that seeks like-minded commentary forming isolationist “filter bubbles,” as Eli Pariser (2012) calls them. Podcasts pull listeners outside of their familiar worlds and challenge their perspectives through their unconventional storytelling. Digital journalism made its first distinct turn toward postmodern narrative in the early 2000s when “the internet with its core narrative attributes of interactivity and speed” accommodated “an understanding of truth is far more open and fluid than the one enclosed by traditional journalistic structures,” which in print is space and in radio is time (Singer 2010: 99). In addition, the construction of meaning is “more open and transparent” and “new formats have encouraged and facilitated a more personal narrative style,” as Singer explains (2010: 89). That fluidity of understandings of truth, and the use of accuracy as a method and avenue toward achieving it, is commonly foregrounded as a subject for exploration through a highly personalized narrative voice in the latest wave of public radio-inspired journalistic podcasts, much in the way it is in John D’Agata’s print and electronic journalistic experiment titled *The Lifespan of a Fact*. D’Agata’s book sparked a firestorm of controversy over concerns for the tension between artistry with objectivity in nonfiction narrative, all masterfully played out in the story’s margins via D’Agata’s email squabbles with his fact checker. While that controversy sent shock waves through the world of print journalism all the way to the cover of the *New York Times Book Review*, such transparent confrontation of the ethical dilemmas involved weighing facts and judging sources are almost standard conventions in the podcasting medium today following in the self-consciously scrupulous mode adopted by narrators such as Koenig and Zupansky.

On the level of narration, the reporter’s own bias is directly stated and openly examined throughout today’s podcasts such as *Serial* and *S-Town*. As such, the narrative voice of the reporter is not suppressed thus enabling a more humanized subjectivity to prevail in place of the unnaturally neutral omniscient narrative voice of traditional newscasts (Lindgren 2016). The emotional tenor of news broadcasting’s narrative voice was perhaps never more moving than in Herbert Morrison’s WLS radio broadcast of the Hindenberg disaster that occurred in Manchester Township, New Jersey in 1937. Interestingly, that iconic broadcast of the passenger zeppelin bursting into flames as it attempted to dock sacrificed nothing in the way of accuracy despite its reporter becoming emotionally overwhelmed by the event he described. In contrast to Morrison’s crestfallen broadcast, Germany downplayed the tragedy with relatively subdued coverage limited to a few newspaper stories, as newsreel footage would not be released to German audiences until after the fall of the Nazi government in the wake of World War II. The Nazis were careful to suppress the palpable misery of Morrison’s anguish, which inadvertently undermined the intended effect of the planned media event as an occasion to leverage American mass-media coverage—particularly through radio—to herald the nation’s newly achieved aeronautical prowess (Duggan and Meyer 2001). Morrison was oblivious to this political context, and instead

lamented the more immediate and visceral human tragedy of the burning zeppelin as it sunk to the earth. Little did the American journalist know that the victims whose fiery demise drove him to tears as millions listened would be memorialized as war heroes by the Nazi government (Duggan and Meyer 2001).

Today's podcasting bears a similar immediacy to the subject that draws the journalist into the narrative, a figure whose emotional tenor sounds the keynote for audience engagement. Just as Hunter S. Thompson held nothing back in his judgment of the "Whiskey gentry" in the clubhouse of the 1970 Kentucky Derby in his print coverage of the event for *Scanlan's*, podcast narrators are increasingly forthright in their subjective commentary. Thompson's (1970) brilliant metacognitive leap in his conclusion, which depicts him uttering homophobic, racist, hate-driven slurs at his illustrator Steadman and kicking him out of his car, is an unmistakable dramatization of his own cultural critique of conservative Southern culture during the Civil Rights movement. Shoving the Englishman out, Thompson rains epithets on him, snarling, "bug off you scum-sucking foreign geek ... we can do without your kind in Kentucky" (McCambridge 2013). His warning is that the immersed journalist risks being transformed—in his case for worse rather than better—by the environment in which they are enveloped. By venturing into intimate contact with the subject, the journalist risks such vulnerability.

In *Serial*, Koenig's moral vacillations have her openly sympathizing with the alleged murderer at moments during the podcast, as she engages in similar moments of personal confession (Lindgren 2016). Her exposure of the dynamic, highly contested, and unstable investigative process in *Serial* has come under scrutiny. Those methods, however, have emerged as not only unassailable, but exemplary in their commitment to balanced and fair perspectives according to experts such as Joe Amditis (2016), professor of Media Ethics and Law in CUNY Journalism School's graduate program in Social Journalism. "She acknowledges when she is speculating or may be wrong, attempts to mitigate any unnecessary harm to the people she deals with," in the process adhering to "a generally unspoken but clearly present code of personal and professional ethics." Thompson also confesses to sliding dangerously into unjustifiable bias by highlighting the cracks in his own moral facade. Koenig's method, like Thompson's, emphasizes the complexity of rendering reality to the extent that its critical consideration demands "a framework that relies on a *combination* of ethical principles, drawn from the tenets of both journalism and nonfiction storytelling, as well as the realm of artistic expression" (Amditis 2016).

## Alternative Business Models for Alternative Storytelling

In the mid-twentieth century, commercial radio with popular musical programming initially dominated the airwaves, leaving little room from innovative documentary work. Public radio began to take listeners on fewer journeys;

longer stories that were produced aired during the dead of night. Now such limitations no longer exist. The audio equivalent of *cinéma vérité* such as the half-hour documentary *Soundprint*, which occupied the margins of station scheduling when audiences were thinnest, typically during wee hours and weekend evenings, has become desirable programming capturing the attention of media investors (Biewen and Dilworth 2010: 2).

Alex Blumberg of Gilmlet Media staked his podcasting venture on precisely that formula. Knowing that the coveted millennial audience has increasingly turned its attention toward longer, more immersive mobile content, Blumberg could see the immediate benefits of documentary journalism as an alternative to the first wave of podcast personalities that were the audio equivalent of bloggers of the early 2000s. Improvisation, wit, and candor carried the day for those early approaches to the medium, but at the expense of crafted professional polish. Now podcasts more frequently contain a tightly woven tapestry of edited interviews, raw audio, sound effects, and narration. Gimlet is dedicated to this labor-intensive production process as a means of earning its market share of youthful listeners. According to a 2017 LinkedIn study, 42% of eighteen-to-thirty-four-year-olds listen to a podcast at least once per week, with an even greater percentage doing so among the twelve-to-seventeen set (Arnold 2017). This represents a dramatic expansion of the 36% of Americans over the age of eleven listening to a podcast just one year prior in 2016, up 75% since 2013 according to an Edison Research study (Edison 2017). The climbing numbers have prompted industry to reassess production standards and content options for programming, specifically to target mobile listeners, who make up 64% of the total podcast audience (Arnold 2017).

Podcasts are the most mobile-friendly online media, thus appealing to more active younger audiences' mobile consumption practices. Earbuds and headphones enable users to listen while in transit, exercising, or occupied with another task. Because of its lack of visual interface, the podcast medium may have the advantage of being the least distracting of online media content in terms of multitasking (Frank 2015). Certainly the evolution of smartphone maps to demand fewer glances at the screen rely more than ever on audio cues for drivers precisely because of sound's lack of interference with visual stimuli. Historically, radio has been the medium of choice for the automotive industry, which now caters to personalized smartphone playlists as Bluetooth technology has become standard in most new vehicles (Edison Research 2017; Frank 2015).

Depth, intimacy, and transparency are prized by millennials, whose lives on social media have enabled them to engage in a process called "constructive authenticity," which is a product of cultural context (Moore 2008, 2014). Despite its liabilities to problematic internet use and other online maladies such as cyberbullying, digital natives have enjoyed the benefits of networked lives and the frictionless ease of dis-intermediated group formation. At its best, the web can "liberate true selves from the constraints of geography and the shackles

of marginalized social identities and empower them to enrich their offline relationships and engage in new ones online” (Baym 2015: 43). Coming of age in the context of the highly colloquial and informal rhetorical culture of blogging, texting, and social media has acculturated millennials to value and seek out media content liberated from the constraints of their immediate social context, a freedom in which “people may be seen as becoming *more* honest in mediated encounters” (Baym 2015: 38). Hence the generational appeal of the podcast’s uniquely intimate quality is communicated through “the grain of voice,” which Roland Barthes defines as “the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs.” Perceiving the “grain” in a piece of music as in a podcast “sets up a new scheme of evaluation which will certainly be individual” and thus intensely intimate (Barthes 1977: 188).

Voice carries a nuanced sense of human presence, which poets such as Walt Whitman correspond to the soul, a force capable of transcending the physical media (specifically the printed page in the nineteenth century and the screen in the twenty-first) and rhetorical conventions communicating it. “Loose the stop from your throat,” the speaker of *Leaves of Grass* urges, exalting “the hum of your valved voice” over and against the formal conventions shaping language such as “rhyme … custom or lecture” (Whitman 1977 [1855]: 33). Podcasting’s aesthetic depends on the charisma and animation of voice much in the way music does. Yet unlike music, podcasting’s performative storytelling is rich enough to accommodate analytical modes in which abstract concepts can be anatomized. Passionate content renders a personal connection to establish a level of knowledge and trust between listener and narrator (Lindgren 2016), one not seen since the unabashedly subjective work of such luminaries as Tom Wolfe and Joan Didion (Coward 2013). Millennials desire more than music. Serials and deep dives in podcasting’s latest programming resonate with digital natives’ greater depth of understanding of topics based on their preferences. Since data has never been more readily available than in the digital age, the youngest generation have developed deeper reservoirs of knowledge in their areas of interest than ever. The narrative aesthetic the podcast has evolved can thus be characterized by data-rich storytelling humanized through the intimacy of voice, transforming subjects like financial and business economics into compelling and highly entertaining audio content.

Deep podcasting content is not quickly nor easily produced. This was precisely the challenge investigative *Financial Times* correspondent Tom Burgis faced when he began podcasting, since the nature of the enterprise occurred on a much larger scale than that of the daily cycle of truncated headline-driven news. “Interviews, documents, legal transcripts … amounted to a trove of the raw information that underpins an extraordinary and sometimes very complex tale,” he observed since he began narrating the *Financial Times* podcast. More than explainer stories, such projects capitalize on the “wonderfully intimate and engaging” nature of the podcasting medium, whose stories, “told right, can be

fantastically gripping.” The key in writing for podcasting, Burgis explained, is “to include enough detail that gives a sense of the depth of the reporting and explains the attribution, without bewildering the ... listener with too much.” Absorbing backstory and an open-endedness for “for updates whenever the next twist happens” proved essential to their formula. As the experimentation continues, Burgis envisioned that podcasts would eventually become the primary vehicle for some stories since multiplatform journalism should be “about finding the form that best expresses the tale” (Ciobanu 2015). News firms from other sectors of the industry have deployed similar methods to the delight of listeners, as with *BuzzFeed*’s first podcast “The Internet Explorer,” which one aficionado described as “campfire stories about the internet” (Ciobanu 2015). The venue has since received both accolades and traffic for “The Tell Show” and “No One Knows Anything.”

Legacy media organizations such as the *New York Times*, PBS, and *The Wall Street Journal* have followed the example of startups and digital-only platforms such as *Slate* by publishing their own podcasts. Gimlet Media is one of the earliest companies to specialize in podcasts, specifically targeting the millennial demographic for its audience (Giliberti 2016). The aforementioned principles of the Slow Journalism movement, which began in Europe with outlets such as *Delayed Gratification* of Great Britain and *De Correspondent* of the Netherlands, pervade those of Gimlet Media’s branding, which centers on its function as an alternative to SMS, a refreshing deep dive “antidote to a 140-character world.” Essential to its mission is the earning of trust through transparency and authenticity, mainly by disclosing to the listener the journalistic process of production (Giliberti 2016). Founder Alex Blumberg, formerly with *This American Life*, explained his business model on his *Startup* podcast in an episode titled “The Secret Formula.” The bet his company has made on its programming is to commit to “professional production and meticulous editing” that demands dedication to longer news cycles for better content than allowed by faster and cheaper methods (Blumberg 2015).

Blumberg (2015) has distinguished his brand from the many “popular podcasts that I personally love where they don’t do anything close to” Gimlet’s sophisticated production process. As an alternative to the many podcasts in which “two people walk into a studio, turn on mics and talk for an hour, then press upload ... our podcasts take months to produce.” Contrary to conventional digital publishing wisdom predicated on speed and automation, deep storytelling through audio longform, “the data suggests, is actually good business,” despite its painstaking artisanal production process (Blumberg 2015). Such polished professional content appeals to millennials, who may interact through SMS, but are averse to sorting and scanning through more hastily produced content like written blogs that do not read well on smart phones (Arnold 2017). Like most users, they seek narrative continuity (Marino et al. 2016).

In a 2016 study of millennial interaction with digital longform, most subjects “did not want the visual elements to interfere with the flow of the narrative,”

and thus skipped clicking on many interactives “so they could continue reading” (Marino et al. 2016: 33). The implications for podcasting are clear in their preference for uninterrupted narrative over built-in detours and discontinuities requiring navigation. For intensely interactive experiences, they turn to VR and gaming rather than what Hernandez and Rue (2016) term the “comprehensive” category of digital longform (121). One subject’s comment that “my instinct was to go for the read and mess with everything else later” reflects this predilection. Another justified her decision not to click on an infographic similarly, saying “I did not want to go to another page” (Marino et al. 2016: 33). These sentiments are not to be confused with a desire for monolithic unilinear storytelling that adheres to a single mode or content type (such as straight single-voiced narration with no sound, theme music, or interviews). Instead, the demand is for seamless and artful packaging of a robust and diverse array of multimodal elements. With Bluetooth synching smart phones to cars, and with smartphones themselves coming standard with a podcasting app, ease of access now matches this frictionless process of consumption given the tight narrative weave of the latest audio storytelling. Slow Journalism meets fast media access in this case to deliver profoundly stimulating and enlightening content easier than ever, a process tantamount to farm-to-table fare of the highest artisanal handmade standards, only delivered with the alacrity of fast food (Dowling 2016).

*Narratively*, which was originally part of the Slow Journalism movement, exemplifies the innovative experimentation in funding models for podcasting. In announcing “our first-ever *Narratively* podcast” to be released January of 2018—not entirely accurate given the platform’s publication of “The Long Haul” in 2012 about female cab drivers in New York City—the editorial staff directed readers to its crowdfunding campaign. Slow Journalism’s proud tradition of crowdfunding began in 2012 with *De Correspondent*’s Kickstarter campaign that broke the record for largest sum of money raised to establish a news organization (Dowling 2016). This method of launching a news organization resonates with the editorial aims and mission of many Slow Journalism outlets dedicated to finding alternatives to news production heavily dependent on third-party corporate interests. Without relying on advertising as the main source of revenue, Slow Journalism’s emphasis has instead focused on enhancing the quality of its content to justify its relatively expensive subscription rates and single issues.

As one of the original digital longform journalism startups in the USA, *Narratively* was inspired by the closure of The City section of the *New York Times* in the early 2000s. The disappearance of longform features on New York, editor Noah Rosenberg realized, could be addressed through a multimedia digital platform perhaps more effectively than the *Times* had. Since then, *Narratively* has expanded its purview to include a vast array of topics, specifically leveraging social media to “connect people beyond clicks and likes” on a

platform “where Twitter wars don’t get more attention than real-world conflict, and where we give voice to ordinary people with truly extraordinary stories.” Via the online fundraising platform Patreon, “*Narratively* readers (and soon to be listeners)” were asked to vote on “Which *Narratively* story we should turn into a podcast?” (Rosenberg 2017). Distributed through social media, this solicitation provided links to four longform features previously published on the digital magazine, effectively accomplishing the twin goal of exposing recipients to its content and crowdsourcing the editorial decision regarding which story to repurpose as a podcast. (Staging a reader vote for product type functions as reliable market research in this case).

The Patreon pitch indicated that podcasting production had begun on a pilot episode “to probe even deeper into a *Narratively* story that captivated, confused, humored, or moved us most” but was forced to cease due to lack of resources, but would continue with proper funding (Rosenberg 2017). As an incentive, readers could then select the topic of the next episode. This unconventional business model is akin to NPR’s membership drives, with the key difference of its digital expression of the publisher’s funding goal, which is not quantified but instead displayed visually by a horizontal feed bar filling in (presumably) at a rate that indicates progress toward the goal. *Narratively*’s marketing of its 2018 podcasts belies its status as one of the earliest adopters of podcasting by a digital longform publication in 2012. Despite the previously noted false insistence on the status of its 2018 podcast as its “first-ever,” the business model remains consistent with editor Noah Rosenberg’s spirit of interconnectivity and transparency integral to the Slow Journalism ethic. Digital longform producers have adopted membership drives leveraging social media, such as *De Correspondent*’s Likes to Members campaign whereby individuals who clicked “Like” on the news organization’s Facebook page were notified of incentives to become members (Dowling 2016).

To fund its first podcast since 2012, *Narratively* in effect transformed its readership into business investors in audio longform storytelling. Indeed, the highest category of patron in support of the platform’s mission to produce “high quality narrative journalism and storytelling” is the \$250-per-month “Superhero Level” that brings not only the requisite t-shirts, totes, and limited-edition zines, but a “Superhero story” about the donor and their organization. The promotional proposition in effect sells the digital magazine’s front page to its most generous readers rather than the highest bidding corporate entity. Contributor profiles also appear on the Wall of Heroes, and are distributed via email newsletters and social media (Rosenberg 2017). Sponsored content is typically produced for corporate entities in the digital publishing industry, not consumers. The innovation lies not only in this novel way of celebrating and rewarding readers in order to fund podcasting, but also in reimagining sponsored content as a crowdfunding instrument. An otherwise ethically dubious trend that threatens to destroy the sacred divide between editorial and advertising in this case becomes a kind of profit

sharing—through gratis reporting, writing, publication, and circulation—with the platform’s most vital stakeholders. Readers thus have incentive to deepen their financial commitment to the publication’s storytelling prowess because they receive publicity for themselves and their own organizations. *Narratively*’s open solicitation of donations in exchange for branded content offers a glimpse into the future of commercial opportunities within the studio function of digital publishing.

The collaborative nature of web and mobile platforms is well suited to crowdfunding, which for *Narratively* “allows new possibilities for participation in the process of producing and consuming news.” This open approach stems from “an obligation to dig deeper, past the handouts” to make the podcast an “investigative activity that addresses social reality in its lively contradictions, and mediating activity” integral to “social reality but which addresses such contradictions in order to deactivate them” (Calcutt and Hammond 2011: 126). The collaborative nature of the web allows for transparency in relation to the exercise of judgments, such as editorial selection of the next podcast, and values. Such dis-intermediated collaboration, as the *Narratively* business model shows, capitalizes on the two-way communication between news organizations and what Dan Gillmor (2006) calls “the former audience.”

By directly engaging in the editorial selection process, the *Narratively* audience becomes more than faceless contributors to a fund, but active participants in podcast production. Through both financial support and editorial selection, online collaboration thus functions as an effective method for engendering a sense of investment from users that is both financial and aesthetic, one that draws them into journalistic funding and content creation. The roles of investor and editor heighten the audience’s sense of engagement and commitment, reverting traditionally passive consumption into the active shaping of a media product. Crucially, the prospect of heightened engagement “forces journalism ethics to confront questions of pluralism, dialogue, collaboration, and transparency” (Maras 2013: 68). Readers, in other words, are asked to consider sponsored content from the perspective of potential brands, rather than as skeptical consumers navigating the web.

The transformation of audience members into potential brands for whom content can and will be created given the appropriate financial contribution is an innovation that points to how the future of content marketing is not isolated to online video. Podcast funding, this case shows, has reached a radically innovative and experimental phase that has reinvented the audience’s role and the editorial and advertising functions of a news organization. Mark Fishbein, founder of B2B (business to business) software maker Alpha UX, is a tech company that uses podcasting to promote its brand. “This is Product Management” is the title of Fishbein’s podcast, which offers engaging storytelling on behalf of Alpha UX, exemplifying how brands are becoming publishers online not just through digital news platforms, but by capturing the runaway popularity and irresistible appeal of audio narrative.

Companies have sprouted in the media ecosystem with podcasts as branded content, using the NPR model of human interest stories for their narrative template. Monica Norton's Zendesk, for example, sells customer relationship software through audio storytelling on topics such as parenting and travel that bear no immediate or direct relationship with her product. Zendesk's departure from traditional B2B content marketing through podcasts seeks to attract readers with powerful narrative, which is "interesting, relevant, even fun and entertaining," rather than badgering them with aggressive company or product messaging or soft-selling with a thinly veiled sales pitch. Immersive narrative in the emerging world of podcasting is therefore good business. "The less the content is about you, the more likely the listener will continue to listen, and be willing to make an appointment to listen by subscribing," according to Norton. The greater the engagement and the deeper the immersion in the audio storytelling, the more listeners will be encouraged "to view the brand in a positive light" (Ascierto 2017).

The profusion of brands becoming podcast publishers—*Inside Trader Joe's* is currently an Apple podcast promoting the grocery store chain—does not suggest that all audio storytelling content is inevitably destined to serve the needs of marketers. Instead, it suggests that "beautiful radio is being produced in the least likely of places" (Abel 2015: 10). Ethics have now received vigorous attention, and new guidelines are being drawn for the digital ecosystem. Gimlet Media has vowed not to cross-promote any podcast it has produced on behalf of an outside company. The roots of public radio's dedication to high-quality content, transparent non-sponsored reporting, and public service journalism are at a key turning point in their evolution toward a more commercially savvy model attuned to the digital publishing industry that has broken down the superannuated categories and sacred divisions of editorial and advertising, of journalistic content creation and fiscal business management. As long as podcasting publishers will continue to court private sources of funding online, journalism will continue along its course of crafting more appealing and relevant ways of attracting and engaging audiences through longform storytelling. As Josh Levin (2014) points out, *Serial* established a kind of radically transparent "tutorial round of poker" for investigative journalistic reporting and storytelling for the medium, whereby the journalist Koenig reveals every one of her cards and lets us into her inner thoughts on how to play them, ultimately landing in the final episode on the epistemological realization that "As much as I want to be sure, I am not." Levin (2014) argues that better than journalism school, one can learn a great deal from Koenig's conscientious dedication to following up with sources, making endless phone calls, and through such actions emerging as "the standard bearer for due diligence, calling everyone, weighing and re-weighing every fact, and remaining conscious of her own obligation" (Levin 2014).

By disrupting the smooth veneer of artifice in unilinear diegetic narrative, the podcast's first seminal product cast the medium in a high self-reflexive mode

designed to encourage listeners to enter the journalistic process themselves, which they did through online discussion and source sharing. The medium, furthermore, would evolve precisely in such a way to carry on that commitment to reportorial scruple and journalistic principle, with the tonal quality of linguistic narration carried through the audio symphony of interviews, music, and conversations, triumphs, and frustrations disclosed through the grain of voice that reaches readers instantly without the interpretive step of reading from, tapping, clicking, or scrolling down a screen. In addition to these distinct qualities of the medium and journalistic methods, free play with genre marks podcasting's evolution, which for *Serial* includes "true crime, detective work, jury decision making, and lawerly rhetoric" (Valdez 2017: 104). As applied to Marshall McLuhan's concept of retribalization, which he associated with the rise of radio and television to the detriment of print media and other learned forms (McLuhan 1965), the podcast is having the reverse effect, as it is expanding rather than diminishing literacy, in the process reconnecting online users to narrative, perhaps the most vital link to our humanity.

Smaller technology companies such as Zendesk and Alpha UX have recognized the skyrocketing success of podcasting and have begun to narrate stories around their products rather than vice versa. The podcasting industry is ripe with innovation and experimentation to the extent that news organizations with roots in public radio, like Ira Glass's *This American Life*, entities formerly averse to commercial radio and corporate marketing, have reinvented themselves as competitors for an audience hungry for richly textured and intellectually challenging narrative. Business models are in radical flux; readers are becoming listeners; audiences are being recruited into the ranks of business partners whose editorial selection sets the production agenda, as in the case of *Narratively*. None of this efflorescence of creativity would have occurred without the mobile audience's discovery of *Serial*, and soon after *S-Town*, the two masterpieces of the medium in the twenty-first century. Podcasting's evolution beyond unscripted improvisation at the mic has extended journalistic expression to new heights.

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# 6

## THE INTERACTIVE ONLINE DOCUMENTARY

### Origins and Emerging Production Practices

At the 2012 Sundance Film Festival, audiences and critics witnessed a major milestone in the evolution of cinema with the debut of *Bear 71*, a work that drew worldwide attention to the emerging genre of the interactive documentary. With its radical departure from traditional narrative technique, the National Film Board of Canada's NFB/Interactive production reflected the culture and technology of the networked multimedia landscape from which it emerged. Rather than passively viewing the film in a traditional linear manner, the audience aimed their mobile devices at a map projection of Banff National Park to enter and explore the world of a radio-tagged female grizzly, roaming autonomously yet in the company of other users whose movements could then be tracked throughout the duration of the festival (Sundance 2017). Documentary narrative, in this case, converged with social media networking to allow viewers to “inhabit the space and play in the universe of Bear 71” as well as that of the festival itself, as interactive producer Dana Dansereau explained (as quoted in Pavlik and Bridges 2013: 33).

More recently, the film’s reformatting and re-release in 2017 as a fully immersive virtual reality (VR) experience for viewing through head-mounted displays (HMDs) signaled the future of immersive journalism (Jardine 2017). The addition of VR enabled the large-scale setting of the wilderness to take on the powerful intimacy of an immersive news experience of the sort showcased in Nonny de la Peña’s pioneering *Hunger in L.A.* Also debuting at Sundance in 2012, *Hunger in L.A.* offered a moving human encounter rather than “cold facts and figures” by “taking a small scale drama and turning it into an emotional confrontation with the everyday reality of hunger in one of the richest countries in the world” (van der Haak 2014). Despite being only seven minutes in length, the work left a deep impression on audiences. “Viewers of the piece tried to

touch the nonexistent characters and many cried at the conclusion,” according to de la Peña (as quoted in van der Haak 2014). Roughly three times the length, *Bear 71*’s 2017 VR edition promised to raise the medium to the apex of its empathic powers.

Although such films experimenting with new media technologies appeared at Sundance since 2007 under the New Frontier programming section, the seeds of innovation had been planted decades earlier. Conceived under the moniker Frontier in 1981 by Sundance Institute president and founder Robert Redford, the program was originally intended “to protect the creative spaces where creators can develop work and reach audiences independent of commercial pressures” (Sundance Institute 2017). A new generation of independent producers has since expanded the frontiers of storytelling through innovative combinations of digital tools and designs. The development of new media technologies since the 2010s has renewed the significance of Frontier’s original premise that creativity can thrive—and even spawn new forms—when free from commercial pressure to conform to the conventional formulas of corporate-owned mainstream media. Arising out of “the convergence of film, art, new media, and technology recognized widely for its cinematic innovation,” *Bear 71* and *Hunger in L.A.* epitomized curator Shari Frilot’s vision of the New Frontier Program, setting the keynote for the genre’s accelerated development (Mousley and Frilot 2016: 110).

This chapter examines interactive documentary’s evolution since 2012, particularly visible in the emergence of 360/VR journalism. 360 video viewed through the “magic window” on mobile devices or with HMDs in the more fully immersive VR format have propelled documentary journalism to new technological and narrative heights, achievements attained in part through alternative brand economies, industrial logics and marketing strategies. News organizations, researchers, and tech companies have begun to explore cost-efficient ways of bringing immersive video to a mainstream audience. As Watson (2017) notes, 360 videos have “made [VR] more accessible to consumers” despite not providing “the immersive experience delivered by a high-end (and more expensive) headset.” For journalists, the new VR technology presents nothing less than perhaps the most potent storytelling tool in all media, one that demands a thorough reconsideration of editing methods, which have radically destabilized ethical principles of production. Out of the early experimental phase an uneven and highly contested set of best practices have begun to take shape, bearing distinct advantages in spatial storytelling, while diminishing the importance of the cut as a vital editorial tool and means of expression.

## Situating Interactive Documentary in the Digital Ecosystem

In the film world, *Bear 71* appeared peerless in its category. Online it stood out among the most fully realized interactive documentaries for tablets, earning a Webby Award in 2013 for Best Net Art. Yet its innovation was not entirely

without precedent, as seen in the context of an early wave of web documentaries following the release of the iPad 2 in March of 2011. Common among them are vast stores of geo-location data cast in interactive multimedia formats designed to deliver immersive nonfiction narratives, connecting viewers to content on deeper cognitive and emotional levels than ever (Bondebjerg 2014). The mobile audience was at the heart of this creative power surge. Weighing in at 15% lighter and roughly 33% thinner than its predecessor, previously the world's best-selling tablet. By 2012, tablets and smartphones featured larger screen sizes to accommodate extended visual capabilities (Mitchell et al. 2018). New designs sparked a sharp rise in ownership of mobile devices, whose technological affordances were ideally suited to the interactive web documentary.

Along with the sudden expansion of the mobile audience, several of the most significant accomplishments in digital design for longform storytelling in media history occurred in 2012. Breakthroughs in digital journalism by legacy media included *The New York Times'* acclaimed online feature “Snow Fall” and the *Philadelphia Inquirer's* ambitious augmented reality (AR) story on the controversial relocation of the Barnes Foundation, home to the most valuable collection of modern and impressionist art in the world. Following decades of rancorous financial and political discord, the holdings' transfer to a public facility in downtown Philadelphia literally defied the will of its namesake Robert Barnes. By pointing phones or tablets at Aurasma Lite quick-response (QR) codes on images in the print paper, *Inquirer* readers immersed themselves in video and data visualizations of the civic arena where the controversy played out, as well as the physical space of the Barnes art collection, a stunning sea of 1500 densely arranged pieces worth an estimated \$15 billion (Pavlik and Bridges 2013: 43).

Whereas the *Times* piece boasted a new digital storytelling experience driven by embedded multimedia elements, the interactive component of the *Inquirer*'s special twenty-four-page section was still tethered to print. For the *Inquirer*, digital content depended on its coordination with the analog publication instead of standing alone as an online longform feature in the manner of “Snow Fall.” Despite that key difference, the common journalistic element connecting these two pioneering publications with *Bear 71* lies in an emphasis on location both as data resource and narrative method. Each builds on narrative journalism's use of setting to function symbolically or like a character itself (Parisi and Holcomb 1994). By providing raw data artfully visualized in animated maps, these works carry the dual function of interactive digital archive (Hall 2001) and living environment whose atmosphere colors and conditions the immersive experience (Schmitz Weiss 2015). These functions advance upon documentary's longstanding capacity to inspire civic efficacy that can spark larger social movements (Nichols 1991: 3; Aitken 2013).

As a breakthrough in situated documentary, *Bear 71* shares with “Snow Fall” and the Barnes story a sprawling networked storyworld featuring a variety of

topics and sub-locales. Each renders an intense sense of presence via narrative transportation (Green and Brock 2002), which constitutes immersive longform storytelling's unique strength across all media. Spatial presence through narrative transportation naturally reinforces the journalistic principle Pavlik and Bridges (2013) observe in "stories put in a local context that act as a supplement to a citizen's direct experience with the world" (21). Users can navigate these virtual environments on micro and macro levels, from in-depth psychological profiles to broader sociological and cultural patterns, with topics ranging from science (the biology of bear behavior; the chemistry of art preservation; the geology of avalanche formation) to economy (the business of National Park tourism; the commercialization of art as an industry; the marketing of backcountry ski products). Like a library imaginatively re-conceived as a digital "living archive" for immersive storytelling (Hall 2001), this interdisciplinary constellation of topics is often arranged in situated AR documentaries spatially to map out the conceptual geography of the story. Like other immersive media such as the podcast, the interactive documentary genre has evolved to emphasize place as the subject of journalistic reportage, thereby dramatizing it as a major player and catalyst of the narrative itself (Parisi and Holcomb 1994; Aitken 2013). We witness this in all three publications that epitomized the 2012 revival of long-form through digital media. Each leverages new media technologies to immerse readers in navigable virtual environments, from the snowy expanse of the avalanche at Tunnel Creek and Philadelphia's sea of priceless paintings to the grizzly bear's lair of the Canadian wilderness.

## Theorizing Interactive Video

The latest phase in the evolution of digital journalism has expanded beyond the linear presentation of facts for passive consumption. Now longer, branching narrative formats within expansive virtual environments are on the rise. In them, subjects are understood in terms of their social, political, and economic contexts, which are embodied and dramatized through their geographical surroundings. Subjects of such situated documentaries are thus "more contextualized and placed within a broader environment of events, trends, and issues" (Pavlik and Bridges 2013: 22). The analytic and ethnographic approach scholars call for as a means of producing more accurate journalism (Neveu 2014; Davis 2016) is embodied by interactive documentary's non-linear interpretive experience of the story's setting, which empowers the user to navigate time, space, and topics in an immersive multimodal environment. The viewing of interactive documentaries, the cases illustrate, is now a complex process of engaged participation with past events. That complexity re-imagines the concept of narrativity, precisely according to a transmedia model (Thon 2016) by using techniques found in fictional media to enrich nonfictional storytelling (Kramer 1995; Abrahamson 2010). Just as the fragmented narratives of Joyce, Eliot, and

Woolf in the literary modernism of the early twentieth century disrupted expectations of older audiences rooted in linear Victorian storytelling traditions, the autonomous twenty-first-century viewer at the heart of interactive narrative in documentary film radically ruptures older forms. Narrative does not disintegrate into chaos in this new form, but instead maintains an internal logic through the lexicon of image and design for navigation that organizes the experience, suggesting “it is possible to adapt to new technologies without sacrificing quality and integrity” (Pavlik and Bridges 2013: 22).

As with multimedia online features, interactive documentary video has evolved toward increasingly polished professional content in contrast to the amateur and/or pro-am user-generated material found on open-source data platforms. Web documentary users typically may not alter content or add their own materials as modders can in Bethesda’s *Skyrim* open-world video game, for example. The architecture of digital space in interactive documentaries nonetheless encourages thorough exploration—if not modification—of the media environment. Full-screen presentation is of course automatic on mobile devices and no competing media can enter the visual field of VR HMDs. The app-like full-screen experience on laptop and desktops intensifies the interface by eliminating the distraction of having multiple windows open (Hernandez and Rue 2016: 105). This highly engaging and interactive design functions as a cognitive container, as the viewer’s attention remains in the space of the story world and its embedded multimedia elements without being scattered onto the open web via hyperlinks (Dowling 2017: 103). Although interactive documentaries deploy a wide spectrum of diverse digital designs, most create a sense “of embarking on an experience similar to a video game or movie” within a unified and self-contained story world (Hernandez and Rue 2016: 103).

Unlike traditional cinema, users can select their own paths through the narrative and even create their own stories from an archive of clips, thus extending the documentary genre’s trajectory toward increasingly sophisticated storytelling (Renov 1993: 30). Clifford Geertz’s famous anthropological study, “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cock Fight,” for example, finds its digital counterpart in the 360/VR documentary “Tajen: Interactive,” which offers an understanding of this cultural practice from the perspective of those who engage in it. To challenge rather than merely reinforce preexisting audience values and political allegiances, the genre has evolved to encourage immersion in topics from radically alternative perspectives, even those of political adversaries as in the MIT-funded *Enemy*. In addition to breaking down “filter bubbles” of political polarization and self-selected bias toward other cultures in online behavior (Pariser 2012), the genre encourages users to think like filmmakers in such works as IDFA (International Documentary Film Festival of Amsterdam) DocLab’s “Come/In/Doc,” a meta-interactive web documentary, and “Capturing Reality,” which enables viewers to select and sequence footage from material arranged by theme and subtheme.

By navigating data-rich maps, users can experience interactive documentaries on the most intimate level through the third-person limited perspective, while also seeing the full expanse of the virtual environment from the seemingly omniscient perspective of 360-degree footage. In this sense, the genre resonates with twenty-first-century place-based literacies and the rise of spatial journalism (Schmitz Weiss 2015). According to Murray (2011), the affordances of digital media are procedural (a set of rules), participatory (inviting action and manipulation of the virtual environment), encyclopedic (the presence of large amounts of data presented in various forms), and spatial (that allows for navigation throughout an information repository and/or virtual environment) (as cited in Aston 2017). Immersive media—particularly the interactive documentary and multimedia feature—have evolved in such a way as to bring a spatial orientation to the other three major affordances of digital media. Indeed, the spatial dimension of interactive documentary storytelling, as this chapter demonstrates, subsumes procedural, participatory, and encyclopedic affordances. Prior to the emergence of immersive storytelling such as 360 video and VR, each of these four affordances was more evenly represented in digital publications, precisely because they lacked the capacity to represent three-dimensional space with such fidelity to the real world, and to plunge the viewer into it so deeply (Aston 2017).

## VR Documentary as Place-Based Journalism

“Place-based journalism” has been valued long before the advent of the internet, particularly for its power to move readers (Parisi and Holcornb 1994; Schmitz Weiss 2015). Marked by the capacity to draw the reader into the setting of a past event through the use of felt detail, that long history includes politically efficacious reporting and textured narrative description. African-American reporter Ida B. Wells’ visceral post-Civil War descriptions of lynchings, for example, helped spark progressive reform, while prompting her detractors to burn down the newspaper office where she was employed (Wells 1970). As with Wells’ prose, interactive web documentaries illustrate how “compared to more pallid content, vivid images of media violence are associated with greater attention to the program, more intense emotional reactions to the story, and greater transportation, or involvement with the story” (Perse and Lambe 2016). Empathy and emotion play crucial roles in the aesthetic of place-based narrative (Bondebjerg 2014; Schmitz Weiss 2015). As with the writings of Wells, the emphasis on setting has been raised to a literary standard in the genre of creative nonfiction known as local color, a category that takes on poetic dimensions from Walt Whitman’s *Brooklyn Eagle* journalism and free verse to Carl Sandberg’s lyrical portrait of Chicago.

Research in media psychology indicates that as media content becomes more immersive, its effect on the consumer intensifies, particularly in journalistic video utilizing “production techniques that ‘invite’ the viewer to become

involved in onscreen action” (Perse and Lambe 2016). Narrative transportation, a level of involvement that often leads to parasocial responses associated with heightened empathy, is directly linked to how realistically events are portrayed, as “more realistic media is more likely to activate mental images” (Perse and Lambe 2016). Engaging narrative storylines drawing from the elements of prose fiction have proven to generate higher levels of sympathetic understanding for subjects, but that empathy diminishes the more dissimilar characters are from their audience (Walter et al. 2018). “If there is considerable social distance between the audience and the characters or the situation in which the characters find themselves, persuasion is less likely to occur,” a limitation that can be overcome, however, by “increasing the degree of social proximity between audience and characters,” especially through their exploration and customization on digital interfaces (Walter et al. 2018: 32). The finding is particularly applicable to interactive documentary, whose design invites users explore the lives and environments of narrative figures and subjects autonomously. Such findings corroborate how narrativity works in tandem with interactive digital media, since greater prevalence of realistic content, interaction, and point-of-view perspectives increase emotional and cognitive engagement. Deployed through traditional media, these elements have proven to produce profound effects, moving users on deep emotional and psychological levels. But combined together and mobilized on 3D and multimedia formats, realistic content, individual point of view, and participatory engagement carry an even greater impact, suggesting interactive documentaries are among the most potent storytelling media in terms of measurable effects.

Interactive documentaries such as “Beyond the Map” epitomize how immersive media encourages deeper involvement with journalistic narrative than ever, a process that in effect “engages a citizenry increasingly disengaged from traditional news” (Pavlik and Bridges 2013). New media’s potential for increased user engagement is particularly evident in 360-degree video, which intensifies immediacy through fictional techniques used to capture nonfictional lived events and subjects rather than escapist fantasies (Atkins et al. 2017). In VR stories viewed through HMDs, imagery plays a crucial role in the effects of narrative transportation (Green and Brock 2002). There are significant differences, however, between the effects of VR stories, 360-degree video (without HMD), and text on presence, memory, credibility, empathy, and sharing (Sundar et al. 2017).

Early adopters of the medium were among the first to produce 360-degree immersive journalism in 2015. These pioneering works deployed distinctly different narrative strategies with varying results (Jones 2017), which have important implications for the evolution of the medium’s storytelling conventions. Wearable and mobile technologies (Pavlik 2016; Healey and Stephens 2017) have been instrumental to the rise of immersive media and digital longform journalism. According to the first major study on the effects of VR journalism experienced with HMDs, immersive new media technology is

equipped with extraordinary power to place audiences “inside the news event” through heightened immediacy and subjectivity (de la Peña et al. 2010). USC’s School of Cinematic Arts was among the first to experiment with place-based journalism to enable users to encounter the plight of the victims and their surroundings in a 3D interactive setting, creating the illusion of presence more effectively than any previous media.

This new medium builds on the longstanding principle of nonfiction film as “the art of *re-presentation*” responsive to “immediate moments” therefore “rooted in a cultural context that should be studied” (Barsam 1979: 583). Like its pre-digital forbears, the interactive documentary “is usually filmed without sets, costumes, written dialogue, or created sound effects,” with the ostensible aim of recreating the sense of “being there,” with as much veracity as the situation allows (Barsam 1979: 583). Just as nonfiction film evolved toward increasingly immersive forms in the late 1960s and early 1970s, interactive documentaries have begun expanding toward longer templates, as seen in “Capturing Everest.” This trend originally began when mid-twentieth-century masters of the documentary genre departed from the thirty-minute standard running time in films such as Leni Riefenstahl’s *Olympia* (1938) at three hours and forty minutes, Marcel Ophuls’s four-hour-and-thirty-minute *The Sorrow and the Pity* (1971), and Louis Malle’s six-hour *Phantom India* (1968). The trend in the late 1970s “toward a length that can adequately accommodate the demands imposed by content, not those suggested by tradition” has reached its apex in today’s cross-media designs (Barsam 1979: 584).

Political implications abound for this highly empathic medium. Interactive documentary’s potential for progressive reform has been noted by lawmakers and diplomats alike. UN Ambassador Samantha Power, for example, was deeply moved when she donned an HMD and experienced the shocking conditions of the Za’atari refugee camp in Jordan that is home to 80,000 Syrians. This piece titled “Clouds Over Sidra” is among the growing list of United Nations Virtual Reality (UNVR) productions made in collaboration with Chris Milk, whose viral TED Talk on the topic describes the medium as an “empathy machine” (Milk 2015). Ambassador Power’s response to “Clouds Over Sidra” was captured in *The Final Year*, a documentary on former US President Barack Obama. Overwhelmed with emotion, Power implored Saudi Ambassador Abdullah Al-Mouallimi to “put a pair of glasses on [that] will take you to the refugee camp.” Breathless, she continued to press him, “it’s powerful … brings home the serious stakes.” The efficacious medium, she urged, could help achieve their mutual objective of “trying to raise money … to get people to support these people in the camps” (Edelstein 2018). VR journalism’s capacity to inspire compassion was first measured in Nonny de la Peña’s (2010) foundational Project Syria research, sparking a series of projects on empathy in immersive journalism (Sanchez Laws 2017). Her 2012 *Hunger in L.A.* (Figure 6.1), and collaboration on *Across the Line*, an immersive re-enactment of a clash between Planned Parenthood patients and



**FIGURE 6.1** *Hunger in L.A.*, 2012

anti-abortion protesters (Ugolik 2017), are forerunners to politically progressive documentaries such as Karim Ben Khelifa's *The Enemy* (Figure 6.2), which leverages the power of empathy through VR journalism to highlight the shared humanity of political adversaries. As a powerful statement against war as a means for resolving international conflicts, the piece convincingly demonstrates that "the enemy is always invisible. When he ceases to be invisible," especially through this deeply intimate medium, "he is no longer the enemy." Khelifa commented that making the viewer feel for the "other" can reconfigure our mental images of them, and in the process alter behavior (Gaudenzi 2016).

Prior to HMD and 360 VR technology, the narrative complexity and emotional import of documentary film had been steadily increasing from the late 1960s to the early 2000s (Bondebjerg 2014). Documentarians have experimented with surreal representations of psychological interiority as in the Japanese film *The Man Who Skied Down Everest* (1975 Academy Award Winner), dramatic character-based multi-plot narratives as in the critically acclaimed *Hoop Dreams* (1994), and scientific data visualization as in Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006 Academy Award Winner). In such cases, "emotional layers in documentaries appear through narrative structures, through character identification, and through audio-visual effects," techniques also used in fiction films. "But they are also directly connected to content and themes with links to real life" in documentary films, and, crucially, "to our decisions to act directly or indirectly when confronted with social problems," such as the refugee crisis referenced above (Bondebjerg 2014: 21). Plantinga's (2009) observation about traditional documentary film takes on new meaning when



**FIGURE 6.2** *The Enemy*, 2014

applied to 360 VR and cross-media web docs: “In movie spectatorship,” he notes, “as in the rest of life, the repetition of elicited emotions and judgments may solidify ways of thinking and feeling” (203). UN Ambassador Power impressed a similar point upon her Saudi Arabian colleague regarding the power of VR. But instead of changing political views and actions through repeated exposure, this potent medium is capable of having the same effect in a single viewing, for “it is through the elicitation of emotion in relation to moral and ideological judgment that a film may have its most significant ideological force” (Plantinga 2009: 203).

### Emerging Technical and Stylistic Norms

Tech companies, news organizations, and researchers in higher education have begun to explore the narrative potential of VR/360 storytelling. Although the medium’s production standards and conventions are just beginning to take shape during this early phase of its evolution, several recognizable techniques have emerged, some of which have been widely adopted by legacy and startup firms at the forefront of industry. Partnerships between tech and media companies have been particularly effective in combining cutting-edge technology with expert journalistic storytelling, as seen in Samsung’s collaboration with the *New York Times* for the production of the 360 webdoc series *NYTvr*. The evolving best practices evident in such products were the focus of two major studies, one by the University of Oxford’s Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, and the other by Columbia University’s Tow Center for Journalism titled *Virtual*

*Reality Journalism.* Reuters provided valuable insight into the future of newsrooms and audiences, especially through insight such as that of *Die Welt*'s Martin Heller, who speculated that, although

2016 was a year of VR in terms of technology developments, but when we look at a mass audience, it's more like 2020 or 2025. We know it's a question of years," he explained, "until VR goggles are in every household in Germany.

(Watson 2017)

The more technical purpose of the Tow study was to identify and examine the most effective use of new tools, especially since "virtual reality represents a new narrative form, one for which technical and stylistic norms are in their infancy" (Aronson-Rath et al. 2015). Led by PBS *Frontline*'s Raney Aronson-Rath, Tow researchers urged practitioners to utilize untapped digital affordances to unleash the full storytelling power of new tools rather than focusing solely on mastering their technology. To achieve this goal, the authors specifically recommended two major techniques: filming directed action in front of the "surround" and adulterating "the immersive video with extra elements, such as computer-generated graphics or extra video layers" (Aronson-Rath et al. 2015).

In the first recommendation, 360 video explodes the traditional 180-degree system. Bordwell and Thompson (1986) define the 180-degree system as "the continuity approach to editing" dictating "that the camera should stay on one side of the action to ensure consistent spatial relations between objects to the right and left of the frame" (384). This pre-digital technique echoes Tow's recommendation that *directed action* should be in front of the surround for 360 VR filming. Beyond this, similarities abruptly end, mainly because the *undirected* portion of the surround (i.e., the back half of the circle) is recorded, and thus a crucial extension of the setting demanding careful consideration with respect to the narrative. Rather than dead space, the rear portion of the surround constitutes vital terrain that viewers are encouraged to explore by rotating the camera angle through the full 360-degree range of vision.

The undirected portion can either reinforce or undermine the message of the directed action in front of the surround. "The Fight for Falluja," for example, contains material in the *mise-en-scène* that potentially undermines one scene's intended message of embedded *New York Times* reporter Ben C. Solomon's grim and alarmed response to the sound of shelling. Upon surveying the full perimeter of the surround, the intensity and seriousness of war in the directed action in front through Solomon's frightened response rapidly dissolves. The portion behind the surround inadvertently steals the scene, as soldiers seem to delight in ruining its staging by openly laughing at the reporter's fear and perhaps also the use of expensive technology to record it. 360 VR's uncanny range of vision captures material potentially anathema to the piece's earnest

keynote of compassion for Iraqi resistance to ISIS, as well as its larger purpose of valorizing this rag-tag militia's opposition to a notorious global menace. Viewers aware of the enigmatic and paradoxical psychology of combat humor might take their plight seriously in this instance despite their own cavalier irreverence. Undirected action can mitigate a shot's meaning to the extent that it robs control of the narrative. On the other hand, undirected action adds a greater sense of unscripted veracity and transparency. At its best, 360 video teems with careening energy of multiple lines of action unfurling simultaneously through multiple ranges of vision. In this sense, the medium constantly impresses upon the viewer Henry David Thoreau's maxim that "the universe is wider than our views of it" both in the visual expanse of the surround and in the range of ideological perspectives it can exhibit in a single shot (1988: 368).

Tow's second recommendation for graphic add-ons and video overlays (Aronson-Rath et al. 2015) encourages greater control of the storytelling through digital augmentation. The content of add-ons and overlays, which in "Capturing Everest" simply consist of text superimposed on the surround, can be integral to the narrative rather than merely ancillary or decorative. The key information they provide can increase tension or provide closure to a scene, not unlike the role of the chorus in Greek and Roman tragedies. These features condition and shape narrative much in the way embedded elements do in multimedia features such as the *Guardian's* cinematic "Firestorm." Indeed, the medium's evolution toward a multimedia interactive form is evident in Tow's recommendation to augment 360 video content with text, graphics, images, and overlaid video. The aim is to make the immersive environment data rich and to control the narrative with storytelling cues for the viewer. Place-based or spatial journalism (Schmitz Weiss 2015) therefore demands more than simply activating technology and letting it document the environment. Ample space exists for structuring and informing the users' experience by elaborating the facts of the storyworld through multimedia superimposed on surround footage. The actual presentation of events in the narrative (known as the plot in fiction film) thus requires visual augmentation through data journalism for optimal results.

Such an example is the *Guardian's* "6X9: A Virtual Experience of Solitary Confinement," which features superimposed graphics appearing like headlines on the walls of the prison denoting the grim statistics associated with this severe form of incarceration. With editorial agenda setting that can be characterized as responsible, progressive, and even activist, audio mainly tells the story, especially through clips from psychiatrists, inmates, guards, and wardens. Combined with the visual of the interior of the cell, a first-person perspective simulates the experience of being in solitary with the *Guardian's* signature use of superimposed phrases appearing in front of their print and digital news headlines on the prison wall, each referring to the causes guards have cited for placing inmates in solitary. The piece leverages the VR platform with an immersive documentary designed to horrify the viewer and thus raise awareness of the

inhumanity of this form of punishment. Similar tactics warning users of threats against their private data online are evident in the *Guardian's* "NSA Files: Decoded."

Similarly exposing the inhumanity and long-term psychological damage of solitary confinement in correctional facilities, Frontline's "After Solitary" tells the story of Kenny Moore's attempt to recover from five-and-a-half years in an isolation chamber served during a twenty-year sentence. "It turns you into an animal," he says while leading a 360-degree tour of his cell, which graphic designers reconstructed from thousands of photos and stitched together in fully dimensional scenes (Mucciolo and Hermann 2017). Superimposed on the surround footage is explanatory text appearing wrapped in white lettering on the walls of the cell itself. In one scene, text conveys facts testifying to the brutal effects of solitary confinement, setting up a later caption indicating facility officials' insistence on the declining use of the extreme form of punishment. This silent yet powerful method of diegetic narrative through superimposed text subtly glosses Moore's testimony and the mimetic rendering of his environment, which is further augmented with brief videos depicting guards' forcible constraint of inmates. In addition to these embedded multimedia elements, Frontline's technical innovation for the piece was the filming of the subject Moore at 8i studios with videogrammetry technology and placing him into reconstructed scenes as holograms (OJAs 2018). No actual filming took place at the Maine State Prison where he was held in order to produce this extraordinary work of VR journalism that earned a 2017 Online Journalism Award for Excellence in Immersive Storytelling (Taddonio 2017).

As digital design has evolved to engage audiences more deeply than ever in the online ecosystem, interactive documentary video presents a compelling instance in which "the preexisting grammar of film is significantly altered," especially the storytelling function of frames, angles, and cuts. Because new angles are always already embedded in 360 video (and depend on the viewer to discover them), the filmmaker does not need to depend on cutting as an editorial tool for spatial representation. With less incentive to use quick cuts to drive the narrative and offer multiple perspectives on a subject—this method can disorient and nauseate HMD users—the effectiveness of the montage as a storytelling technique diminishes (Aronson-Rath et al. 2015). 360 VR also minimizes the former importance of expository techniques such as the L-cut, which informs audiences with spatial information. Commonly used by documentarians, the L-cut carries over audio from the previous conversation onto the next shot to contextualize it or lend it deeper meaning. Contextualizing information instead can appear throughout the extensive space captured by the surround footage of a well-placed 360 camera, as in the scene of the Sherpa-led ceremony prior to the assault on the summit in "Capturing Everest."

Cutaways, which take the audience away from the main subject to create tension and further contextualize the environment, are also no longer essential

to the editorial palate of the 360 VR filmmaker, whose action behind the surround performs that function. The category of the scene in 360 VR now typically consists of a single shot rather than a crafty ensemble of them. This places greater importance on the fewer cuts that do appear, mainly because the duration of the average shot length is so much longer. Because shots contain twice the visual information (a full 360-degree spherical view of the world versus a 180-degree rectangular slice of it), less cutting is required to establish the basic visual terrain of each shot. Frames, angles, cuts, and montage may have faded in significance as tools for visual storytelling due to the continuous nature of VR, but such techniques have migrated to other digital forms, mainly the online multimedia feature via scroll-driven narration, also known as “scrollytelling.”

Traditional editorial techniques less reliant on the cut to establish continuity are far more compelling when deployed in 360 VR. The long tracking shot and pan, for example, have become staples of the new medium because it allows the viewer to experience travel and motion with a full range of vision. Hence travel, distance, and movement remain core components of the spatially oriented narratives that have come to define the genre, as seen in “Beyond the Map” and “Capturing Everest.” Interestingly, since it is already built into every shot, 360 VR automates panning by in effect placing the camera in the hands of the viewer. (“Pan” is the term for a shot that provides a rotating panoramic of a scene in traditional film). 360 VR is ideally suited to journalistic documentary’s dedication to verisimilitude by virtue of its reliance on storytelling through spatial narrative emphasizing mise-en-scène rather than through cuts emphasizing time. “The cut is more manipulative” because it “interrupts and remodels reality.” By contrast, “the pan is the more realistic … since it preserves the integrity of space” (Monaco 1981: 143–144). Andre Brazin observed connections between realism and mise-en-scène, and impressionism and montage, a point useful in explaining 360 VR’s predilection toward nonfiction storytelling. Journalistic documentary in this sense shares the spatial storytelling staple of mise-en-scène with realistic fiction films. With its space-driven narrative more thickly layered with more mise-en-scène than ever, 360 VR technology uses movement—both the filmmaker’s and the viewer’s—through the virtual environment to dictate tempo, since what “montage simply did in time is what mise en scène does in space,” as Jean-Luc Godard observed (cited in Monaco 1981: 145).

Despite the loss of quick cutting and montage as engines driving visual storytelling, producers of VR journalism can maintain narrative control in graphic and video overlays as well as direction of subjects before the camera. The technology may be highly automated, but it does not establish the course of the narrative journey nor plot the thematic interconnections between its branches and detours users may choose to pursue. As Marconi and Nakagawa (2017) note in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, VR represents a major departure from conventional narrative journalism, precisely by virtue of immersing

audiences and empowering them with greater autonomy than ever. As with Google’s “Beyond the Map,” “audiences will be able to choose different story paths as they freely explore the virtual space,” a process akin to open-world gaming, only in a nonfictional context of a “choose your own adventure” version of journalism,” according to the 2017 Associated Press study (Marconi and Nakagawa 2017). As multimedia experiments bearing important relations to interactive documentary, the *Inquirer*’s QR and the *Times*’ scroll-activated storytelling (referenced earlier) encourage but do not force users down a prescribed path. Sticky navigation in “Snow Fall” and AR in the Barnes piece allow for autonomy, yet still conform to a distinct story arc, especially through the cinematic use of visual multimedia elements.

The viewer of *Bear 71* is similarly immersed in a potentially overwhelming amount of data, yet non-diegetic narration maintains focus for the spatial storytelling preferences and place-based knowledge of today’s online audience (Schmitz Weiss 2015). Beginning with moving footage of the capture, radio tagging, and release of a three-year-old female grizzly bear in Banff National Park, the piece then releases the viewer to explore the behaviors and travels of the animal—along with other wandering humans mounted with audio and video recording devices—through surveillance clips taken by cameras rigged throughout the wilderness. The viewer can navigate the terrain autonomously, as non-linear serendipitous exploration is balanced by Mia Kirschner’s narrative voiceover from the perspective of Bear 71, tethering attention to the arc of story that follows the bear’s life for the next five years until the dramatic closing scene. In terms of its construction of a compassionate narrative from the perspective of a wild predator considered dangerous to humans, the film shares a great deal with the literary journalism of *American Wolf: A True Story of Survival in the American West* (2017), the story of O-Six, a charismatic alpha-female wolf conservationists returned to the Rockies. The wolf’s journey reflects deeper clashes of culture permeating the western USA much in the way *Bear 71* sends a clear conservationist warning regarding the human imprint on the natural world.

While audio maintains narrative trajectory, open-world design encourages autonomous exploration through hundreds of thousands of pictures, clips, and images captured by motion-detector web cams revealing how other tagged animals and humans encroach on the bear’s territory and affect her life. In the process of blurring the lines between “story structure, database information, surveillance, and the complex interrelationship between humans and animals,” the piece relies on an intense place-based interactive experience (Hernandez and Rue 2016: 145). The characters are identifiable as real radio-tagged animals and humans carrying geo-trackable mobile technology, establishing a social matrix of the wild through which we follow the travails of the female grizzly, the story’s protagonist. The call to action to alleviate the human impact on the natural environment after the film’s denouement draws its power in direct

proportion to the immersive effect of this highly interactive version of an already political medium (Aitken 2013; Perse and Lambe 2016).

A telling sign of the tech industry's centrality to the evolution of the interactive documentary appeared in *Bear 71*'s 2017 re-release, five years after its original debut, as a virtual reality work designed for viewing with Google Daydream and the more affordable Google Cardboard. Originally an interactive documentary for tablets, the film's re-release as 360 VR recalibrates the target of its mobile audience from tablet to smartphone users. Google Daydream is an entirely mobile headset designed for use with smartphones. Daydream has been touted by reviewers as the best of its kind, complete with a front Daydream View compartment for smartphones to be experienced as VR through the two lenses. Its soft tapered cloth materials resemble those of an airplane mask rather than the bulky technology associated with HMDs such as Oculus Rift. The design allows it to be worn comfortably for hours at a time, a feature that meets the rising demand for immersive longform in a media landscape dominated by longer works—from podcasts to on-demand TV—suitable for binge watching.

Although *Bear 71* was not originally shot for viewing with an HMD, it lends itself well to the new medium, and thus Google's efforts to promote it, precisely through the kinetic quality of the footage and its physical location in the wild. HMDs were essential to the many interactive documentary projects that followed *Bear 71*, including Google's "Beyond the Map" and *Sports Illustrated's* "Capturing Everest." As discussed later, promotional purposes are central to their form and content, as each company's branding initiative informs its overall conception of the interactive documentary genre. Neither Google, nor any other brand, tech or otherwise, had a stake in the original 2012 production of *Bear 71*, initially a public media project via the Canadian National Film Board (NFB) and the Canadian National Park system rather than corporate industry. Google needed just five years to leave its brand on the piece, lending it a corporate presence it never originally had. However, this corporate partnership arguably may not undermine the conservation message, as Google Daydream ostensibly increases the immersive effect of the medium and thus its power to move viewers to action on behalf of its conservationist message (Aitken 2013; Perse and Lambe 2016).

A key factor distinguishing *Bear 71*'s process of production from those of interactive documentaries by Google and *Sports Illustrated* lies in its partnerships with both the National Film Board of Canada (NFB), for digital architecture and construction, and the Canadian National Park system, for its raw data. Indeed, the piece demanded no independent development of data-gathering devices, methods, or even immersive reportage in a remote location. Instead, a vast untapped data cache of thousands of hours of wildlife footage taken by motion-activated cameras for surveillance of Banff National Park was repurposed as the raw material for place-based journalism. Leanne Allison originally proposed the project as a traditional documentary to the NFB, who suggested

instead an interactive format. The project made novel use of already available technology and resources for the purpose of interactive spatial journalism (Schmitz Weiss 2015). Wired with cameras for conservation and law enforcement purposes, the thoroughly documented Canadian wilderness of Banff was repurposed as an ideal journalistic digital archive. In this sense, the film is the product not of corporate partnerships or branding strategies, but of new video surveillance technology funded through the notoriously exorbitant Canadian tax code. The automated recordings brought a windfall of data simplifying the information gathering portion of the reporting process. Thus the film's conservation message traces back to that of the publicly funded data gathering of Banff National Park, which in turn was shaped into the interactive narrative by the NFB, yet another nonprofit entity charged with serving the public interest rather than marketing its brand.

Unlike the production process for traditional documentary film that is mainly dedicated to shooting extensive original footage and culling a fraction of it for the final cut, the most labor-intensive and time-consuming aspect of *Bear 71* was in curating the park's endless low-resolution images and footage. Since Allison shot none of the wildlife footage herself, her task was essentially editorial, yet in ways totally distinct from conventional documentary production, which would have left thousands of hours of footage on the cutting room floor. Whereas bonus material provided on Blu-Ray DVDs previously attempted to expand the notion of the film during the late 1990s and early 2000s toward a video archive of extras such as an extended director's cut, supplementary interviews, and behind-the-scenes clips, today's interactive format offers the viewer access to extensive material in the form of a virtual environment designed and sequenced to invite exploration. Earlier instances were even more limited. Frederick Wiseman's *High School*, a groundbreaking documentary for its time notable for its use of only diegetic sound and images to tell its story, has a running time of only eighty minutes drawn from over forty hours of raw footage (Bordwell and Thompson 1986: 315). The audience in 1968 had neither access to the archival footage nor any way of controlling the consumption of the eighty-minute film's one-way, top-down narrative process.

The digital archive in the case of *Bear 71* lends itself well to VR, as outdoor settings continue to set the standard for interactive web documentaries. Just as "Snow Fall" was set in a remote mountain range that included broad cinematic vistas and data visualizations to instill a dynamic place-based narrative, *Bear 71* centers on cultural geography, as footage is geo-tagged and time stamped to enhance the sense of presence. In addition, the non-diegetic narrative brings an intense sense of empathy to the bear's plight, drawing the viewer into the animal's experience from its point of view. The personal connection with subjects in the film, which builds on documentary cinema's increasing use of emotional appeals and literary techniques (Parisi and Holcomb 1994; Bondebjerg 2014), is enhanced by VR. "Capturing Everest" capitalized on the empathic power of the form

when it became the first feature-length film shot in VR released on the internet. The compassion for the climbers, whom the viewer joins in the ascent of the world's most iconic mountain, intensifies in proportion to the film's immersive quality much in the manner of Google's "Beyond the Map." Google's partnership in the re-release of *Bear 71* by virtue of enabling viewing through Google Daydream and Google Cardboard carries important implications for the evolution of interactive documentary.

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# 7

## THE 360/VR DOCUMENTARY

### Tech Industry and Sport Media Case Studies

As a key component of its brand-building strategy, the humanization of digital mapping became the focus of Google's public relations campaign leading up to the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympic Games. To capitalize on the massive audience generated by global media coverage of the event, the company partnered with *Epic Magazine* to produce "Beyond the Map," an interactive documentary released one week prior to the 5 August opening of the Games. Through a series of short films transporting the reader to various locations in Rio's culturally vibrant yet economically challenged areas known as the Favelas, viewers can select from various routes through narrated cut scenes. Drawing from a similar function common to open-world video games, users then transition via spectacular drone footage that soars high above the city and plunges deep into the catacomb of narrow streets. Including cut scenes, the piece was shot entirely with 360-degree and virtual reality (360/VR) technology, featuring motorcycle footage captured in full surround from the perspective of a rider's helmet-mounted camera. Cultural immersion and navigation become one, as the experience of the Favelas blends thrill-ride footage with probing feature profiles of local inhabitants. Through its close connection to geographies and locations, this highly sharable content that circulates free without a paywall typifies how ethnographic journalism has increasingly become an instrument of digital marketing.

The previous chapter's theoretical framework for interactive documentary established the medium's unique power to elicit empathy in spatially oriented narratives. Such narratives are characterized by newly forming technical and stylistic norms that rely not on cuts for storytelling, but surround technology's contiguous and capacious range of vision (de la Peña et al. 2010; Aronson-Rath 2015; Sanchez Laws 2017; Watson 2017). Through this framework, the current chapter focuses on how the industrial strategies and media technology behind

Google's "Beyond the Map," "Moon Shot," and *Sports Illustrated*'s "Capturing Everest" have expanded the template of the interactive documentary since the 2012 breakthrough of *Bear 71*. These case studies represent the immersive turn of journalistic documentary toward longer narratives set in data-rich virtual environments with more user autonomy for access and navigation than previous forms allowed (Aston 2017). Geography's impact on culture and vice versa are central to branding campaigns for a leading tech company in the case of Google, and legacy sport media outlet in the example of *Sports Illustrated*. Google has a major stake in geolocation and GPS technology through the development of 3D interactive mapping made famous through Google Earth, and *SI* seeks online market share by presenting digital and interactive projects in light of its prestigious reputation for longform literary journalism that includes outdoor adventure writing. Significantly, *SI* invoked this genre when it first entered the digital longform market in 2012 with a multimedia piece on the mysterious disappearance of NBA star Bison Dele on a catamaran voyage in the South Pacific, a work digitally repurposed from a feature profile published over a decade earlier in the print magazine. New technologies for longform storytelling, as this chapter argues in the cases of Google (Figure 7.1) and *Sports Illustrated*'s (Figure 7.2) interactive web documentaries, have become immersive precisely insofar as they augment and enhance place-based journalism (Schmitz Weiss 2015).

It should be noted that "Beyond the Map" and "Capturing Everest" are 360/VR documentaries, whereas "Moon Shot" was produced with conventional video technology. "Moon Shot" is included here to illustrate how crowdsourcing functions as another frontier of the interactive documentary genre, one that

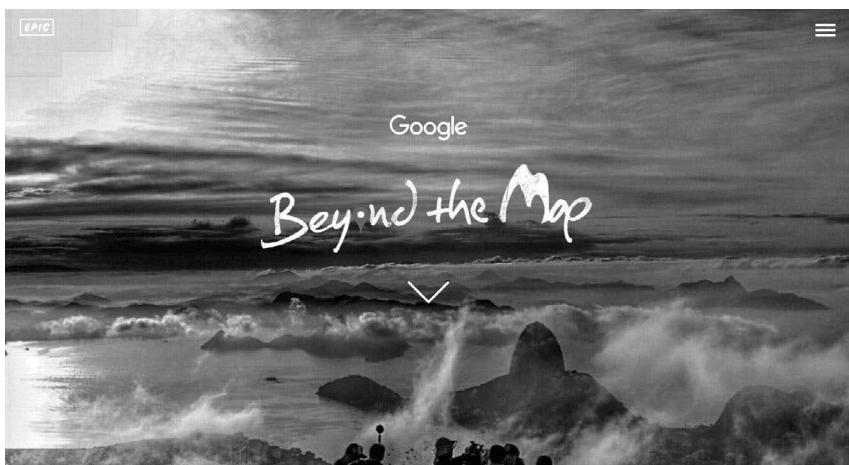
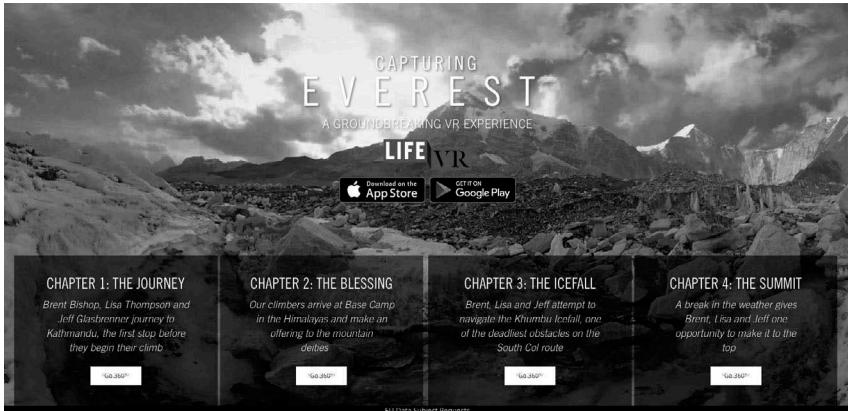


FIGURE 7.1 "Beyond the Map," Google, 2016



**FIGURE 7.2** “Capturing Everest,” *Sports Illustrated*, 2017

Google has utilized for brand building and discovering the technology necessary for its colossal ambition of mapping the moon. The case study of “Moon Shot” is thus more concerned with the industrial uses of the film than with its own technologies for cinematic production. Although it is not shot with 360/VR technology, the film offers important implications for the expansion of these technologies, particularly by casting the notion of interactivity according to the mobilization of the audience as partners in the scientific production of technology. In it, the interactive user is immersed in the process of production, rather than consumption, of spatially oriented online media. In this manner, “Moon Shot” continues the through line of this book that characterizes the rise of immersive longform storytelling as exposing, rather than concealing, the process of production as journalistic and narrative subject.

### Branching Narrative and the Google Brand: “Beyond the Map”

Perhaps more than any function besides its ubiquitous internet search engine, which has become a verb in colloquial speech throughout the world, Google has drawn recognition as an industry leader in mobile digital mapping. To appeal to the coveted mobile audience, 90% of whom are constantly using location-based services (Anderson 2016), the company has differentiated its maps from the competition by emphasizing place in comparison to more navigation-oriented products such as Apple’s AR Flyover for iOS 11. Google’s augmentation of map locations has advanced beyond visitor reviews and popular times to include contextualizing images and material designed to encourage deeper exploration of communities and cultures. Immersive geographic storytelling is not an end in itself, but a means of inspiring the user to move beyond the map and into the world.

The Favelas have little web presence and thus are largely invisible in digital culture mainly due to their existence *beyond the map*, outside the reach of online cartographers. The project, therefore, presents Google as fulfilling the company's presumed social mission to bridge the digital divide by mapping this uncharted terrain, and thus give presence and significance to the Favelas, most of which were unmapped on Google Maps at the time. The highly sharable series was designed precisely to leverage Olympic coverage of Rio undertaken by all major media outlets of the world given the magnitude of the event. This local color of the host city was told through branching or ergotic narrative, as Hernandez and Rue (2016) describe film that allows the viewer to choose their own path through the story (103). Those paths follow several denizens of the Favelas. In all cases the narrative avoids soliciting the subjects as objects of sentimentality, but instead humanizes them through authentic moving portraits. To this end, Google avoids criticism of the sort the *Guardian* and *Atlantic Monthly* leveled at Facebook regarding the technological imperialism/digital colonialism of its Free Basics campaign (Lefrance 2016; Solon 2017).

In "Beyond the Map," the journalistic treatment of subjects is ostensibly progressive and compassionate. This sensibility is particularly evident in the profile of one Favela resident who overcomes homophobic hostility and harassment in pursuit of his dreams of learning classical ballet at an elite academy for the performing arts in downtown Rio. A unifying motif connecting each of the figures profiled in "Beyond the Map" is digital technology, which for this aspiring performance artist takes the form of a video game dance simulator essential to his early development. Another profile delves into the story of a young woman who seeks a career in computer science, a story directly linked to Google's brand and its theme of bridging the digital divide. A third segment profiles a middle-aged entrepreneur of many stripes who had run a business launching hot air balloons in celebration of prison releases, spectacular shows of freedom financed by family and friends of the released inmate. Google mapping technology in his case improved his business ventures by making him more visible to customers, especially in support of his most recent company specializing in surfing and wind-surfing lessons. Aspiration is a common element connecting their stories, and Google's digital technology plays a central role in each.

Technology is not only a major theme informing and structuring the film's narrative. It is also vital to understanding, celebrating, and enriching the Favela communities. Dance and local culture are showcased in the piece as in any well-produced major network Olympic broadcast covering the host city's culture and society. But beyond the purview of conventional Olympic human-interest features, the piece emphasizes that the process of creating Google Maps requires this sort of intimate connection to a community's culture and people. According to the film's promotional and branding logics, digital mapping technology is vital to the individual and collective welfare of Brazil's, and by extension the world's, most impoverished populations. Navigation, for example, is crucial to

the travel of the young dancer to the academy, and to the entrepreneur in attracting customers through a visible web presence. The film itself embodies this vision of liberation through technology, as 360/VR and drone cameras joined the cast of characters playing key roles in this and many other stories (Conboy and Eldridge 2014; Eck 2016). Like the stunning drone footage of the *New York Times'* "Greenland is Melting Away," "Beyond the Map's" interactive 360-degree shots taken on a motorcycle speeding through the Favelas are not merely a display of technological prowess, but drive the narration of its cartographic theme.

Digital cartography is thus a process of cultural geography, according to the thematic import of "Beyond the Map." The work's spatial conception of subjects and styles strongly suggests the formation, however embryonic, of interactive documentary's first genre convention emphasizing people and place. Interestingly, the environment of the film in this case never places the viewer in the presence of a conventional map, but instead represents space through filmed footage (as in Google Earth or Satellite) for immersion in the lived ecosystem of the Favela communities. This controlling metaphor of cartography—as organizing principle for the film's subject, branding strategies, and user experience—is a self-reflexive iteration of the "third meaning" Roland Barthes (1977: 52) describes in film, one that lies just beyond denotation and connotation. The "excess" that Kristin Thompson defines as "precisely those elements that escape unifying impulses" in this case actually serves the film's unifying principle (as quoted in Bordwell 1985: 53). While the viewer can savor random color, shapes, and sounds on screen not immediately linked to the figure being profiled, such details point to Google's uncanny capacity to evoke a place, and thus support the film's unifying principle of digital technology's role in the cultural geography of developing communities. The third meaning of "Beyond the Map" is thus industrial and cultural, and inheres a pattern linked to the story.

Whereas interactive documentaries may not appear on the surface to have "as strong a narrative structure as most mainstream fiction films, narrative structures and character identification are still strong components in many documentaries," according to Bondebjerg 2014: 15). Viewers of interactive documentaries are encouraged to engage with content in such a way that develops into a coherent story. "Beyond the Map," for example, leads the viewer to assemble the narrative. The film's segments seem to ask, Who are these people? What are their aspirations? How does this location influence their story? Why is it important that they should be on "the map"? For "Moon Shot," the questions are still character- and plot-driven in nature. What makes the technology these scientists are developing worthy of charting the moon's surface, of developing the technology necessary to provide the first online extraterrestrial map to compliment Google Earth? Therefore "even though a film may not offer a very strong narrative structure itself, spectators will use narrative frames," such as scene, tension, rising action, and resolution, "to understand and relate to the film" (Bondebjerg 2014: 15).

Interactive documentary editing plays into the viewer's innate desire to assemble a story of the content. According to Sergei Eisenstein, the staging of action is a representational act, "a pattern which the perceivers of narratives create through assumptions and inference." The details behind that pattern, David Bordwell (1985) explains, constitute the data with which "the viewer builds the fabula on the basis of prototype schemata (identifiable types of personas, actions, locales, etc.), template schemata (principally the 'canonic' story), and procedural schemata (a search for appropriate motivations and relations of causality, time and space)," all processes that are intersubjective (49). The interactive documentary has reconfigured the gestural, connotative quality of film by enabling a more thorough and autonomous exploration of the range of vision of any given shot. What brings unifying meaning to interactive documentary now lies as much in "what is materially present on the screen or soundtrack" as in what is implied beyond it (Bordwell 1985: 49). Indeed, 360 VR technology enables us to connect eye-line match edits ourselves as viewers in what is essentially a cut-free experience on the level of the scene. That is, very little in the immersive virtual environment of documentary film can be deemed irrelevant to the narrative precisely because location is at the heart of the genre's evolution into a technology whose special power lies in telling the story of place. "*Beyond the Map*" embodies precisely that impulse to capitalize on the strength of 360/VR technology.

A major departure from traditional film in interactive documentary lies in the sequencing of events. The viewer of "*Beyond the Map*," for example, is invited to explore the narrative profiles of the figures featured in the film in any order they wish, beginning atop a hill above the sprawling narrow streets of the Favelas. In the presence of the narrator the viewer can choose their path in this virtual world as in a video game, thus becoming the architect of their own string of experiences. Useful in understanding the aesthetic and narrative structure of this effect is Roman Jakobson's concept of stylistic composition via paradigmatic groupings based on "the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection to the axis of combination." The profile features, for example, are similarly produced in terms of shots, pacing, and duration, each rearranging documentary narration into "paradigmatic groups basic to its construction" (Bordwell 1985: 277). "*Beyond the Map*" offers a typology of aspiration as a deep dive into the lives of Rio's inhabitants, told through the immersion of the viewer, whose control enables them to shift between them at will, yet within a virtual environment emphasizing similarities of paradigmatic categories of race, social class, connectivity, privilege, and, ultimately, technology's role in each. (That technological role, of course, bears the Google brand.) As Bordwell describes of film narrative, "any sequence of units—phonological, syntactic, semantic strives to build an equality with the others, creating designs" within the larger work. Claude Levi-Strauss identified this effect in literature, one in which such designs have a unifying effect by virtue of being "similarly superimposed upon contiguity" (Quoted in Bordwell 1985: 277).

Whereas fiction films in the avant-garde and experimentalist tradition often deliberately interrupt narrative flow with “a discrete burst of technique, immediately arresting our attention and disrupting the construction of a unified *fabula*,” or the flow of the story, Google’s interactive documentary technique works differently (Bordwell 1985: 320). Since it is shot entirely with immersive video technology highlighting its own new capabilities, there are few deliberate diversions to demonstrate the producers’ technical prowess and/or unorthodox narrative technique. In interactive documentaries, the viewer is not at the mercy of the filmmaker to endure non-linear interludes. “Discrete bursts of technique” are instead dictated by the viewer, who, as in open-world gaming environments, is invited to push the boundaries of the virtual environment and its technological capabilities (Bordwell 1985: 320). Unlike with traditional films, the camera is in the hands of the user, as it were, who is free to view every shot of the film from any angle they choose. Yet the location and dramatic situation the viewer follows is of course what is scripted and, in the case of “Beyond the Map,” artfully designed to reinforce the branding purposes of Google. If we are to feel a sense of overload, it is only due to our own eccentric or dizzying viewing patterns, which in 360 VR can theoretically rotate constantly without pause through the duration of the video, or conversely point straight up, thus disorienting any coherent understanding of the scene.

As with navigating virtual environments of open-world gaming such as *Gone Home* and *What Remains of Edith Finch*, becoming adept at capturing the optimal experience through sequenced selection and camera movement requires some dexterity and agility on a tablet or laptop and a period of acclimation for those new to HMD technology. This process is akin to what Steven Johnson (2006) calls “probing” and “telescoping” to explore the physics of the buried logic of the simulation, and to anticipate hurdles and rewards in that virtual environment in pursuit of narrative development (48). Just as open-world gaming environments are not designed for virtual loitering—although some diversions built into the landscape allow for just that—the user is on a quest to discover how the narrative will unfold. The medium of documentary film still prevails in the sense that the viewer rides along through the environment in each shot sequence as if in a long video game cut scene. In interactive documentaries, the world of the film can be explored autonomously, but not with the sort of total interactivity with the environment associated with open-world games, in which one can move objects and converse with individuals.

The viewer of “Beyond the Map” does participate, however, in the narrative by choosing their own path and dictating which video segments to view and in what order. Thus, the level of interaction is mainly observational and thus interpretive, involving moving the angle of vision with a mouse click on a desktop, screen tap on a tablet, or turn of the head with HMD, and exploring data caches. Movement abets novel perspectives and discoveries of new data in the local setting, bringing us into the stories of the inhabitants. The primary

actions afforded to users in interactive documentaries allow for exploration of the interconnected video archive in any order since they are situated among others to establish a coherent whole. As of yet, designers are only beginning to incorporate avatars into interactive documentaries.

The first to do this was Nonny de la Peña's *Hunger in L.A.*, a seven-minute interactive experience discussed in the previous chapter. The embodied viewer is clearly the next frontier of the interactive documentary genre. Ethics are crucial to its development, as de la Peña's viewers must choose how to respond as they play themselves as a character in a recreated news event in which a man collapses and begins convulsing violently in a diabetic coma while waiting in a food line in LA. The graphic design and setting of the scene are precisely like those of the *Grand Theft Auto* video game series set on the mean streets of Los Angeles. Yet the key difference is that the user of *Hunger in L.A.* experiences the scene wearing an HMD and animates their character with natural movements through motion capture technology. VR-embodiment researcher Jeremy Bailenson noted during a Stanford University experiment the acute sense of intimacy and responsibility when one is fully embodied in the virtual environment. After performing a virtual vivisection, he was overwhelmed with remorse. He reported how he "simply felt bad. Responsible. I had used my hands to do violence." Activating a game controller with punch or shoot buttons "is an entirely different experience" from first-person immersive media where one uses virtual hands and limbs to act directly on characters, whether providing effective life-saving assistance, as in *Hunger in L.A.*, or striking, shooting, or stabbing characters as in VR horror games Kitchen and Surgeon Simulator (as quoted in Rothman 2018: 33; Fox et al. 2009). Madary and Metzinger (2016) noted that the "risk of suffering psychological trauma will steadily increase as VR technology advances," arguing that a code of ethics should be instituted that prohibits virtual killing and sexual violence, particularly for embodied motion capture simulations of which Wii Sports was a forerunner (3). Post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms have been reported by users of HMDs, especially in gaming systems such as Oculus Rift. Although this powerful new medium will likely spread moral panic as with television and comics, caution is still necessary, particularly given the medium's evolution toward longer, more immersive content increasing the volume and intensity of the virtual experience. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, is the lack of longitudinal studies on the effects of long-term use of VR for hours at a time over the course of weeks, months, and years on a scale analogous to that of smartphone use today (Rothman 2018: 33).

At this juncture, it is important to distinguish precisely the range of autonomy of the immersive experience in interactive documentaries. VR journalistic content can be understood as engendering a sense of "Spatial Presence," defined as "a binary experience, during which perceived self-location and, in most cases, perceived action possibilities are connected to a mediated spatial environment,

and mental capacities are bound by the mediated environment instead of reality” (Wirth et al. 2007). The key to determining the nature of immersion in interactive documentaries compared to that of podcasting or other less-interactive media lies in the digital design affordances built into the mediated spatial environment. The common ground in the psychological research on spatial presence useful in understanding the most distinctive function of interactive documentary understands it as “a subjective experience, commitment, or state of consciousness, when perceivers feel bodily or physically situated in a mediated environment” (Hartmann et al. 2015).

Probing the environment, as Johnson (2006) astutely observes of gaming, “often occurs just below the level of consciousness” (43). Just as gamers discover and learn about open-world environments by playing in them, interactive documentary users learn about cultures and events through exploration of an entire nonfiction world, one animated through place-based journalism. Interactive documentaries do not come with manuals, for this reason. Navigation is intuitive and inviting, since the computer is “doing more than serving up clearly defined rules” for navigation; “it’s concocting an entire world, a world with biology, light, economies, social relations, weather.” Thus interactive documentaries each come with their own unique “*physics* of the virtual world,” which is more than practical navigational information, but a challenge to the user to delve deeply into it and explore its interconnected networks of inhabitants and layers of meaning of the environment (Johnson 2006: 44). Like in video games, interactive documentaries challenge the viewer to achieve an understanding of the nature of the virtual environment, by virtue of “withholding information about the underlying rules of the system” (Johnson 2006: 42). That system is the complex cultural geography that supplies the setting—the Favelas, the moon, Banff National Forest—for the event and subjects of place-based journalism.

In classic avant-garde cinema, “spatializing the narration cooperates with the impossibility of ordering the film according to one narrational mode,” usually carried out so that “the chief effect is to fragment the process of viewing into a series of moments.” Interestingly, in a multimedia interactive format, the journalistic documentary driven by interviews and non-diegetic narration also works in fragments. The key difference, however, is that each segment of film in the case of Google’s productions, “triggers a search for an elusive pattern—the film behind the film” that is eventually confirmed through the exploration of the viewer. In classic avant-garde cinema, however, it is never confirmed (Bordwell 1985: 320). Each profile of the Favelas residents signifies community uplift via technology, the underlying pattern connecting them that provides the “film within a film,” one ultimately discoverable through independent exploration across the communities. The transitions are supplied by spectacular Google Earth zoom-outs, elevating the point of view high above the action of the last scene, soaring over the city, and landing amid a new setting featuring a new

subject for profiling. Cutaways are now long, continuous 360-degree tracking shots, transitions packed with visual information allowing narrative coherence.

## Crowdsourcing Technological Production: “Moon Shot”

While “Beyond the Map” positioned Google as partner with Rio’s disadvantaged population in order to bridge the digital divide, “Moon Shot” aimed at the colossal goal of putting a robot vehicle on the moon. The purpose was to collect and return data and images of the lunar surface—essential for the construction of a multimedia map—through crowdsourcing to inspire a single feat of technological innovation. Representative teams from the global scientific community vied to be the first to land robotic digital technology on the moon, with \$30 million reserved for the winning Google Lunar XPRIZE project. Google partnered with *Epic Magazine*, a publisher specializing in multimedia digital longform narrative, to produce a nine-part series of character-driven short films suitable for binge watching. Following an introduction, eight episodes profile each of the teams competing for the coveted prize, which Google bills as “the new civilian space race.” The ostensible goal, according to *Epic*, is to “prompt entrepreneurs to dream up affordable ways of reaching the moon and inspire future scientists, engineers, explorers and unconventional amateurs” (Gonzales-Mowrer and Lock 2018).

The documentary’s purpose is to tell each team’s story, detailing “the lives of the idiosyncratic members, their strategies and sacrifices, and what inspired them to take on this challenge” (Gonzales-Mowrer and Lock 2018). Equal parts romantic and quixotic, the application of the winning project is muted in the series, but eventually is revealed as a method by which Google would discover an affordable way to reach the moon and extent their online mapping empire to an interplanetary scale. The mapping objective can be reasonably discerned from Google’s requirements for the winning project: the winning robot must demonstrate mobility once on the moon by traveling a minimum of 500 meters across the lunarscape, and geo-data delivery by sending HD video and images back to Earth. Whereas Leanne Allison began her project with a windfall of geo-data from Banff National Park’s motion-capture footage of Canada’s thoroughly wired wilderness, Google turned over to civilians the costly and time-consuming struggle to discover a way of gathering data of the moon’s surface. “Moon Shot” not only fulfills the marketing objective of valorizing technological development, it also signals a show of support for independent scientific innovation among grassroots startups.

The film’s eclectic cast of scientists, ranging from Silicon Valley tech specialists to hackers in Germany to IT experts in India, were independent teams reminiscent of the Homegrown Computer Club of 1980s Palo Alto, whose members included Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak. The wood-encased Apple 1 was the result of Jobs and Wozniak attempt to “liberate some parts

from some HPs and IBMs,” business machines whose (hacked) components were essential in developing the prototype of the first personal computer (Dowling and Haman 2017: 353). “Moon Shot” executive producer J.J. Abrams, renowned for his production of the television series *Lost*, which helped ignite the cultural obsession with binge watching, explained his affinity for making a documentary detailing similarly situated independent scientists working on the fringes of the tech industry. “I’ve always liked working on stories,” he said, “that combine people who are relatable with something insane” (Gonzales-Mowrer and Lock 2018). The anti-corporate grassroots nature of these developers certainly has its appeal, and harnessing their energy through the Google Lunar XPRIZE is an imaginative approach to the next frontier of online mapping. Implicit in the narrative, however, is Google’s presence waiting in the wings as the angel investor.

While Google frames its objective of mapping Rio as aiding socio-cultural progress by providing essential digital tools to enable citizens of the Favelas to realize their professional and entrepreneurial ambitions, the company’s plan to map the moon is articulated also through analytic and ethnographic journalism casting it in a similar role as patron of technological development. The documentary emphasizes the benefits of technology that accrue to the subjects of both “Beyond the Map” and “Moon Shot.” What is de-emphasized and carefully hidden from view, however, is the massive profit Google stands to reap in mapping the Favelas and the moon. The winners of the Google Lunar XPRIZE are poised not to become equal partners into perpetuity. Presumably winning teams yield the patent of their project to the world’s most powerful tech company, thereby expanding its monopolistic reach over global—and even intergalactic—corporate media industries. The unprecedented expansion of the Google Empire is the corporate protocol underlying the altruistic appearance of benevolent paternalism portrayed in the documentary. The prize money of \$30 million is a modicum of the potential revenue Google might generate with the first complete online map of the moon installed through privately funded robot technology. All but the five remaining teams disbanded by early 2018. Although these five teams secured launch contracts, it soon became clear that they would not be capable of reaching the 31 March 2018 deadline, eliminating all contestants and leaving the \$30 million Google Lunar XPRIZE unclaimed.

The quest for a soft landing on the moon to mobilize “small robotic lunar explorers that are far cheaper than big Apollo-like missions that take humans” may have been discontinued, but the initiative to gather lunar surface data through a cost-efficient method is not likely to be abandoned soon (Gonzales-Mowrer and Lock 2018). The economic incentives for achieving that goal are quite considerable, especially in light of Google’s confirmation that the commercial exploitation of the moon is perfectly legal (assuming the company’s nation deems it so), despite the Outer Space Treaty’s stipulation, ratified by 100 countries, that “forbids any government from claiming any celestial resource,

such as a moon or a planet, since celestial bodies are the common heritage of mankind.” Free market enterprise, however, is entirely permissible, as noted on the Google Lunar XPRIZE website: “The treaty, however, is largely silent on what private companies can do on the moon, stating only that private activities should be overseen by the respective national governments” (Gonzales-Mowrer and Lock 2018).

### **Re-branding *Sports Illustrated*'s Longform Legacy for the Digital Age: “Capturing Everest”**

Just as Google sought uncharted territory at the far reaches of the globe and the moon itself to stake its claim in the new media ecosystem of immersive online storytelling, *Sports Illustrated* set its sights on the iconic summit of Mount Everest. Capitalizing on spatial journalism’s unique appeal to audiences’ place-based knowledge (Schmitz Weiss 2015), *SI*’s “Capturing Everest” reprises the cartographic theme common to immersive media. Profile feature storytelling augments the significance of the main narrative covering the dramatic journey to the summit. Brent Bishop serves as veteran guide and son of Barry Bishop, a member of the first American team to reach Everest’s summit in 1963. He is joined by Lisa Thompson, breast cancer survivor, and Jeff Glasbrenner, who lost his right leg just below the knee at the age of twelve in a farming accident. Told that he would not be able to swim, cycle, or run by his doctors, Glasbrenner turned his attention to proving them wrong, amassing an astonishing twenty-five Ironman triathlon finishes by the age of forty-four. The most accomplished athlete of the three, Glasbrenner became the first amputee to reach the top of Everest on an expedition that also made media history as the first ever bottom-to-top ascent of Everest filmed in 360 VR.

“Capturing Everest” distinguished itself for its length and format consisting of four eight-minute episodes, significantly extending the standard three-to-five minutes for VR. The film functions differently on a narrative level than the highly interactive data-driven *Bear 71*. Rather than presenting a map challenging users to decide where to enter the environment, “Capturing Everest” unfolds in the manner of an on-demand TV docu-series. The sense of immersion is immediate, as the user is treated to an experience previously only available in IMAX theatres. Episode one opens during a training session in preparation for Everest. On the high cliff wall, surround footage is at its most compelling. Any distinction between action in front of and behind the camera vanishes in contiguous angles that all contribute vital material to the *mise-en-scène*. We see climbers on the cliff overhead and on either side of us dangling from the precipice, the open ethereal sky above and away from the rock wall, and the plunging precipice below. The climber equipped with the camera is situated at the center of the group, which is spread out on the cliff. The shot effectively places the viewer on the wall with the climbers, thus breaking down

the arbitrary divisions between directed/non-directed action. Non-diegetic narration allows the visuals to dominate. The interactivity here lies not in selecting data caches and scanning maps to navigate the virtual environment as in *Bear 71*, but in the seemingly omniscient power to scan all angles of every shot. Like Emerson's transparent eyeball in the forest, the user sees all but is nothing, disembodied and emptied of self precisely to achieve a visceral nearness to nature and humanity.

Cliff-hanger endings, recap openings, and an icon in the upper-right of the screen indicating progress toward completion all draw on on-demand television series conventions for the digital design of "Capturing Everest." Each episode, however, is packaged to stand alone as an autonomous piece in order to increase spreadability on social media. The film's transmediation extends to *SI*'s print magazine, where readers can use their mobile device to scan the AR box on the cover featuring Glasbrenner. Although HMDs provide the optimal experience, panning or simply swiping a finger on the screen in any direction allows views of the surrounding field of vision. Pictured in action on the mountain, Glasbrenner's prosthesis is prominently displayed on this *SI* cover. The artificial limb takes on profound symbolic significance as a colossal quest—not unlike Melville's Ahab in *Moby-Dick*—to capture one of nature's most elusive prizes in a highly dangerous and unforgiving environment. Just as the material of Ahab's leg, crafted from whalebone, connect him to the creature he wishes to capture, Glasbrenner's prosthesis signifies an interface between technology and nature reflective of his ongoing obsession, one riddled with failed attempts. We learn in the film that he had made several fruitless attempts to summit peaks in South America, failures in part due to the design and materials of his prosthesis. The new improved version specifically engineered by NASA for this expedition is presented as an enabling and liberating technology, which he pulls off and proudly displays for the camera in one scene, brandishing the lever-like reinforced limb galvanized with aggressive corrugated tread. The leg is instrumental to Glasbrenner's accomplishment, adding a significant dimension to his individual realization of strength and endurance as a statement on behalf of human potential. Ingenuity and technology enable us to attend the journey as well, as the prosthesis comes to represent our own ascent through VR—an improved technology of an old media form—with him.

Rather than relying on voice-of-God narration often used in traditional documentaries, extra-diegetic narrative is supplied through the commentary of the three subjects. The lack of omniscient audio narration allows for a more cinematic viewing experience, precisely because the film instead focuses on "strong central characters doing something filmable directly related to their story," which is the expedition itself, rather than shots of them describing a past accomplishment (Tu 2015: 74). Real-time live events are the staple of televisual sports journalism. To maintain that feel, no *SI* reporters and production crew appear in the main film's audio or visual content. Journalistic control is evident

in the explanatory text superimposed on the screen, which is strategically positioned at intervals around the perimeter (rather than clustered in one spot) to encourage exploration of the full panorama. Between action and climbing sequences, characters thus narrate their own stories—providing the color commentary as it were—through responses to interview questions left off the soundtrack. Tension lies not only in the uncertainty regarding the reliability of the NASA prototype prosthesis, but also in the text superimposed on one screen indicating data on the many fatal attempts to reach the summit. To reinforce this ominous portent, the next scene depicts a spiritual ceremony led by Nepalese Sherpas invoking divine succor and protection. The final scene depicting the ascent begins with a grim statement, again displayed in text, indicating that much of the footage was lost at this phase of the journey due to an accident in which a Sherpa fell upside-down on a secured line. The “behind-the-scenes” video, however, describes the incident through metadiegetic narration, as the brief documentary on the making of the film showcases the crew and technology otherwise carefully kept out of the film.

“Capturing Everest”’s adoption of the docu-series on-demand format has implications for the sharp rise in longform storytelling online. Unlike slant and bias associated with shortform and headline-driven news briefs, longform has the virtue of greater accuracy. Rather than representing only a sensationalistic strategy devoid of rigorous reporting, the use of first-person narrative and intimate subjectivity is linked to rigorous reporting and deep documentation in interactive longform web documentaries. Journalism not only benefits from analytic and ethnographic (Neveu 2014; Davis 2016), it is also enhanced by literary techniques and strategies, which have been shown to enrich nonfictional storytelling (Kramer 1995; Abrahamson 2010). Further, longer stories are more likely to be remembered than shorter ones (Graber 2001) and video and moving/animated graphics have a greater long-term impact on audiences than still images or print (Ravaja 2004), according to media effects research.

Drawing on these advantages, *SI* self-consciously highlighted its legacy in longform journalism, which it had done in its first digital features for its “Going Deep” department established in 2012 just after the publication of “Snow Fall” (Dowling and Vogan 2015). To promote “Capturing Everest,” *SI* emphasized its brand as legacy longform through Bishop’s father’s 1963 achievement as part of the first American team to summit the famous peak. But one decade earlier, *SI* published the most thorough coverage in the news media at the time on the 1953 first ever ascent by Sir Edmond Hillary. As with Google’s brand-building according through cartography and groundbreaking exploration by which geographical terrain becomes a trope for technological advancement, *SI* invoked the space race of the mid-twentieth century when technology and exploration converged “long before the moon landing” when “mankind made its first terrestrial leap” (Stone 2017).

Hillary's Nepalese guide, Tenzig Norgay, co-wrote his autobiography with James Ullman, which was published in *SI* as serial longform in four issues of 28,000 words, an epic narrative clearly situating itself in the genre of literary journalism giving free play to lyrical highly subjective impressions. His momentous first glimpse of the peak, for example, is an occasion to reflect deeply on humanity's connection with nature along with the deeper meaning of the achievement. "My mountain did not seem to me a lifeless thing of rock and ice," he wrote, "but warm and friendly and living." To him, the expedition transcended national boundaries, a "victory not only for our own nations, but for all men everywhere," just as the 2016 ascent is a resounding affirmation of human potential to survive disease and overcome disability through technology, ambition, and endurance (as quoted in Stone 2017).

The symbol of a summited peak is rich with implications for the current capabilities of humanity, but Everest in particular has functioned culturally as a barometer measuring the state of humanity. The 1953 ascent reflected a terrestrial version of a lunar landing in the age of the space race, captured through serial longform, the most immersive medium of its time capable of transporting readers by evoking the moments of the journey through crafted literary techniques and intimate modes of expression. The 2016 ascent exhibited the power of new media technology as an extension of this immersive longform legacy, a connection visible in its publication format as a four-part video series that echoes its four-part 1953 print forebear. To signal that its brand is still climbing, *SI* showcased the new technological and athletic frontiers reached in "Capturing Everest." In this way, the brand placed itself on the leading edge of immersive longform storytelling in the digital age.

The medium is the message, as McLuhan would have it. But the message is not delivered so much as created through interaction. In "Capturing Everest," both the HMD-wearing and laptop or mobile users epitomize the concept of technical interactivity, "a medium's capability of letting human users manipulate the machine via its interface" (Fornas 2002: 23). As with reader response theory in literary study (especially Rosenberg's *Literature as Exploration*) that stipulates that a work of literature bears no meaning without the interface of its user, the 360 VR media text also depends on the interpretive autonomy. A literary text requires readers, especially those willing to explore new terrain, in order to take on meaning much in the way interactive documentaries require active users to have any significance as a medium. The user of "Capturing Everest" engages in precisely such meaning-making textual interactivity, one instantiated by "the creative and interpretive interaction between users (readers, viewers, listeners) and texts" (Fornas 2002: 23). Interactivity previously alluded to the audience's new capacity to respond to news organizations online on the read-write Web 2.0. Now creative interaction is accommodated and encouraged as a means of exploration for independent interpretation *within the media text itself*.

In “Capturing Everest” the technology of narrative becomes the narrative of technology. Just as the earliest silent films were as much stories of their own new media technology’s capabilities—deliberately stunning the audience with footage of an oncoming train in *The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* (1896) that sent them sprawling out of its way—360 VR is in a similar moment, in which its narratives showcase its own technological prowess. Contiguous spatial orientation has never shown so much depth in online video. The conventions of open vistas and kinetic action have emerged, as seen in the medium’s predilection for mountain climbing, motorcycling, skiing, and flight. More than a carnival of the senses through soaring spectacles, interactive documentary’s empathic powers suggest unprecedented potential for progressive political reform.

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# CONCLUSION

## The Immersed Journalist

Upon his return from his full-bodied immersion into the brand industry and culture of the motion picture industry, Morgan Spurlock appeared on a late-night talk show in a suit covered in brand logos looking like a surreal hybrid of Tom Wolfe and a NASCAR driver. The outfit was an apt token not only of how journalists bear the impression of their immersion into foreign territory, it also expressed the point of his documentary film *Pom Wonderful Presents: The Greatest Movie Ever Sold*, unmasking the film industry's heavy reliance on external corporate funding for production. Spurlock's signature immersion journalism is uniquely adapted to deconstructing the industrial logics of corporate bands, from their marketing to their place in consumer culture.

Along with Louie Psihogios, Spurlock leads a wave of innovative documentarians who have used immersion methods to infiltrate and expose processes of industrial production, from commercial cinema and fast food to the black market for endangered wildlife. With his signature radical environmental journalism, Psihogios directed the Academy Award-winning film *The Cove*, which won Best Documentary Feature of 2009, and *Racing Extinction*, which debuted in 2015 simultaneously at the Sundance Film Festival and on the Discovery Channel, where it became "the most watched cable documentary film premiere" with 11.5 million total initial viewers and 6.5 million encore viewers (Pederson 2015). Discovery Channel executive vice president John Hoffman estimated a total audience of 2.4 billion for *Racing Extinction* (Pederson 2015; Rich 2015). By comparison, *The Cove* won cinema's highest accolade, but was only seen by a fraction of viewers. Through transmediation from theaters to cable and SVOD (subscription video on demand), *Racing Extinction* proved far more effective at achieving its activist goal. The film thus epitomizes how activist documentary cinema, a previously marginalized niche genre, is

increasingly reaching mass audiences through strategic cross-platform publishing and robust social media marketing campaigns.

This conclusion examines how documentary's turn toward increasingly absorbing narrative structures has inspired a resurgence of investigative longform journalism leveraging immersion methods. Investigative immersion journalism tends to take on the form of a quest, experiment, and infiltration, with such modes overlapping in most projects (Hemley 2012; Conover 2016). Immersive documentary and multimedia journalistic products, as this book has shown, tend to showcase the process of immersion journalism itself. The result has been to add a sophisticated critical dimension to factual documentary's development toward performative narrative (Hill 2008; Boyle and Kelly 2016), yielding a cross-pollination of genres particularly evident in television's restyling of factuality that has spawned an array of genres. Now the spectacular styles of natural history television documentaries—edited into coherent dramas designed to resonate with implications for human society and behavior—join undercover investigations, reconstructions, and observational types (Hill 2008; Gray 2009) within a multiplatform context (Van der Haak et al. 2012). Although docu-soaps and reconstruction-style programming have been categorized as “documentary diversion,” viewers have become aware that documentary in film and television is rapidly changing. “Heavyweight documentaries” in particular have emerged, according to Hill (2008), which include special interest and serious content (222).

Within the broader evolution of immersive longform storytelling, such “heavyweight documentaries” have cast the immersed journalist as the protagonist. The movement toward captivating narratives designed to increase audience engagement and distill attention is consonant with the revival of immersion journalism, which has given rise to a new generation of celebrity journalists renowned for reporting on their experiences in unusual and often highly dangerous situations. The publication in 2000 of Ted Conover's *Newjack: Guarding Sing Sing* inspired figures like Sebastian Junger, for example, who engaged in live combat in Afghanistan to produce his magnum opus, titled *War*. Conover's revelatory and disturbing portrait of his stint as a New York State prison guard influenced not only the work of Psihogios and Spurlock, but also the younger generation that includes Shane Bauer. At the forefront of immersion journalists, Bauer won international acclaim for “My Four Months as a Private Prison Guard,” his *Mother Jones* narrative, which he is expanding into a book. He is joined at the leading edge of the genre by *Vice* journalist Medyan Dairieh who infiltrated ISIS to produce a powerful web documentary that garnered 3 million views two months after its August 2014 release. “Subjectivity with real substantiation” (Tanz 2007; CBC 2012)—not just reporting the story, but being “in the story” (CBC 2012)—defines how reported facts and narrative voice combine to make immersion journalism a category of literary journalism (Sims 2007; Hartsock 2011; Conover 2016; Dominguez 2017; Giles and Hitch 2018: 76).

Several forces have aligned to create and condition immersion journalism into one of the most recognizable and politically potent forms of longform storytelling, a genre that “has experienced an extended renaissance over the last decade,” according to Roiland (2018: 184). Journalism’s interpenetration with narrative techniques and styles drawn from fiction and entertainment media has led to more engaging content, made more so by interactive media technology that deepens audience engagement with complex issues (Usher 2016). Fictionality is apparent in factual media content, and, conversely, factual elements are now recognizable in fictional content (Conover 2006). Production aesthetics have evolved to reach “a new level of stylization” through “the cross-fertilization of documentary and drama, information and entertainment in factuality” (Hill 2008: 223). Tom Wolfe and the New Journalists similarly drew from fictional forms to enhance the narrative impact of their longform reportage, a vestige now apparent in digital and multimedia iterations of literary journalism (Jacobson et al. 2016). Storytelling driven by the immersed journalist—whether under cover or as a participant-observer—provides a more empathic, humanized entry into the storyworld itself by enlisting interest in the journalistic process of production. Rather than concealing the journalist’s methods to render the subject from an omniscient perspective, storytelling from the vantage point of the immersed journalist brings the audience into the world of their subjectivity. Effective immersion journalism casts the journalist’s experience in a broader light whereby the reportorial professional predicament comes to stand for the concerns and conflicts of the larger culture. As Hemley (2012) notes, the immersed journalist “is almost always a stand-in for the culture’s neurosis and anxieties” as well as a representative of populations “whose everyday existence” is under investigation, from the minimum-wage workers of Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and Dimed* to the prison guards in Florida’s private correctional facilities of Bauer’s *Mother Jones* project (62). The genre is thus simultaneously concerned with both dramatizing the reportorial function and shedding light on larger cultural issues.

Interactive digital technologies are ideally suited to this dual function of immersion journalism. The return to the principles of longform storytelling that began with New Journalism in the 1960s is in large part fueled by the digital revolution. The internet’s unique affordance that enables users for the first time in media history to explore remote foreign cultures and communicate with their members directly resonates with the core premise of immersion journalism. As Conover (2016) has noted in his recent book on the craft, “immersion implies leaving home—or at least spending significant time outside of it—engaged in daily exposure to your subjects and the problems they face” (16). In digital culture, the immersed journalist has thus become an avatar for exploration. Immersion journalism’s distinct literary leanings “can answer to complaints about the superficiality of journalism,” offering “cures on several levels,” especially that of “commitment” (Conover 2016: 16). Conover (2016) speaks

to the methods—and perils—of Psihoyos, Spurlock, Bauer, and Dairieh explored here, ones that emphasize, “this is no drive-by. I did more than get a quote [from subjects]. I lingered and listened. I got to know them as multi-dimensional” (16).

## Modes of Engagement

The journalist’s penetration into the culture and consciousness of subjects intimates precisely the same deep attentional focus in the audience. As Sims (2007) has observed, immersion is perhaps the most quintessential of literary journalistic forms, in part because it so earnestly takes on subjectivity as its central concern (Hartsock 2011: 36). The journalist’s subjectivity plays a key role in the narrative, as in Bauer’s disclosure of his own desire to confront the demons of his traumatizing stint as a prisoner in Afghanistan by taking a job as a guard in a private Florida prison. To occupy the role of his former captors meant venturing beyond the perspective of inmate, one with which he was all too familiar. In the nonfiction narrative “Anechoic,” Ashley Butler similarly took the method of immersion journalism beyond the binaries of narrative presence versus narrative omniscience in her quest to capture the physical experience of loss and absence. In it, she bodily immersed herself in a sensory deprivation chamber at the University of Iowa’s Speech and Hearing Center, and submerged herself in flotation tanks in research centers in Chicago. These are all entry points to another consciousness, a process often described through water metaphors, as in Tom Wolfe’s original notion of “saturation reporting” (Conover 2018). Sims (2007) has since updated “saturation” with the term “immersion” to capture the more vulnerable process of delving full-bodied into a foreign culture.

As a radical means of achieving empathy for how others live, journalistic immersion entails exploration of alternative physical and geographical environments. In this “unusual social world, the journalist takes part by insinuating themselves into it” (Conover 2018). The purpose is not only to understand another environment and its psychological condition, but also to record the changes in the journalist. Disclosure of the immersed journalist’s personal transformation is consonant with the rise of first-person narration in digital culture, a development fueled by blogs and social media’s ubiquitous platforms for personal expression. The use of highly subjective first-person narrative does not necessarily preclude reportorial rigor and fact checking. Citizen journalism online, particularly of the sort that has been instrumental in breaking stories of political consequence, suggest a “move away from the presumption that journalists can not only be objective, but also that they can simultaneously be subjective and fair,” as Conover explained during his keynote speech at the 2018 meeting of the International Association for Literary Journalism Studies.

Reflexivity and activism represent core components of immersion journalism, particularly in its ethnographic anthropological dimensions. Anthropology

adheres to “interior understandings of cultural systems,” such as those of the secret cove Psihoyos investigates to reveal the systematic slaughter of dolphins (Conover 2018). In his case, concern for “how I was like and not like them” only reinforced the cultural dissonance and disparity between his Japanese subjects’ destruction and desecration of sea life in sharp contrast to his own radical conservationist agenda (Conover 2018). The horrific process inspires compassion for the dolphins rather than the workers. Similarly, Bauer operates according to such an activist agenda focusing on the subjectivity of the prisoners’ experience since he had been one. In both instances journalists play key parts in shaping the outcome of events much like characters in novels. The transparency in this method suggests the omniscient third-person approach to immersion journalism is dishonest by contrast. In *Among School Children*, Tracy Kidder falls prey to this conundrum by “removing himself from the narrative despite his daily presence in the classroom [of elementary children] obviously changing their behavior,” as Conover (2018) astutely remarked. Such self-removal from a narrative in order to shield the influence of one’s inevitable biases can be construed as disingenuous (Hemley 2012: 8; 10).

Digital culture’s multimedia affordances have ushered in greater interactivity for networked collaboration and subjective modes of expression. Audience engagement has commensurately risen with the socialization of authorship as a pursuit now more deeply engaged in community than ever. As one of the most prominent forms of longform storytelling, documentary has become immersive in a politically engaged and reflective way rather than providing pure escapism. Research shows that audiences are aware of the constructed nature of documentary film and video, for example, and appreciate the aesthetics of these stylized representations when executed in such a manner as to not interfere with, or detract from its veracity. As Corner (2005) points out, this dual consciousness can be understood as the “referential integrity” on the one hand, which is rooted in reportorial fact, and “aesthetic value” on the other, which demands a suspension of disbelief for deep immersion in that story world. Yet the journalism is strengthened rather than compromised, especially in its empathic function, through this dual engagement in an experience “that is at once sensual and intellectual, referentially committed yet often possessed of a dream-like quality for the indirectly suggestive and associative” elements (2005: 53). Documentaries often have “cueing functions” that determine shifts from real to associative modes of expression. Nichols (2001) recognizes a similar dynamic in documentary, especially in their “assumption that the texts, sounds, and images have their origin in the historical world we share” through “an indexical relationship to the events they represent” on the one hand (35). On the other, audiences also understand that those facts have been assembled for them to make an argument, and that “the film as a whole will stand back from being a pure document or transcription of these events to make a comment on them, or to offer

a perspective on them" (Nichols 2001: 38; Maras 2013: 79). Even journalists who imagine their work as strictly archival with no value added, such as those behind the activist Indian platform *Dalit Camera*, still select and curate transcribed speeches and raw footage to shape messaging according to editorial policy (Paul and Dowling 2018). That material on *Dalit Camera* is hardly neutral, instead serving its pointed activist protest agenda on behalf of the nation's lowest and most chronically oppressed caste.

Psychological modes of engagement complicate audience awareness of both the aesthetic and reportorial functions of narrative journalism. The immersed journalist's psychological mode of engagement might set a keynote tapping into similar emotions in the viewer, but they yield to individual responses and effects in audience members depending on their own unique psychological profiles. The deeper the journalist dives into a foreign world, the more absorbed the audience becomes, but not in identical ways due to individual psychological associations viewers might bring to the media text. Audiences bring both a horizon of expectations for journalistic genre conventions, whose narrative intrigue and humanistic subjectivity have steadily risen in the digital age, and a set of psychological experiences in tow. Bollas (1993) usefully defines two modes of engagement, one with experiential reality and the other with reflection upon its significance. This is vital to the function of immersion journalism, which both invites audience engagement via "the simple experiencing self and the complex reflecting self." These "different and independent modes of engagement" are primarily immersive, according to its sensory definition, and reflective, according to its associative one colored by each viewer's unique psychological perspective (Bollas 1993: 15).

Crucially, the intersection of these modes of engagement is embodied in the figure of the immersed journalist. Audiences encounter the experience of immersion through the journalist's narrative. Bollas' formulation appears in his book, *Being a Character*, on the psychology of parasocial feelings toward characters within narratives, a concept with rich implications for immersive storytelling's use of the immersed journalist as a character with whom audiences can identify. Indeed, Bollas' (1993) concept of sensory experience and cognitive reflection occurring in this "intermediate space" (18) describes a dynamic fundamental to literary journalism's primary purpose to "narrow the distance between subjectivity and the object" (Hartsock 2000: 132) both on conscious and unconscious levels. As Hill (2008) notes, "the viewer can be immersed in the documentary, and at times step back and reflect on this" (230).

## **Brand Culture Unmasked**

Viewers of Morgan Spurlock's *Supersize Me* (2004) learn from the outset that the predicament depicted in the film is constructed as an experiment, but in such a way that does not detract from its referential integrity. That commitment

to accuracy becomes a matter of measurement, in this case the psychological and physical effects of his dietary immersion. This first foray into the immersion method consisted of a one-month odyssey in which he consumed all of his meals at McDonald's restaurants, selecting only from expanded-portion menu items. The film exposes the corrosive physical and psychological effects of the *Supersize* campaign, designed to entice overconsumption, thereby imperiling the health of customers at a profit. Immersion journalism in the film functions as consumer activism, part of the advocacy strain in his later television work in the Fox series *30 Days* (2005–2008), which advocated on behalf of labor (coal mining), disability, and the LBGTQ community (Baym and Gottert 2013). The common thread in his work is the denaturalization of not only consumer products, but also labor and political ideology. Such experiments in immersion expose accepted conventions of human consumption, work, and values as artificial constructs in need of radical reform. The box office success of *Supersize Me* made it the fourth-highest-grossing feature documentary of all time (Baym and Gottert 2013).

Spurlock's work aims to elicit self-reflection and ideological tension in audiences. Prior to *Supersize Me*'s debut at the Sundance Film Festival, he arranged for a test screening "to see how people would respond" (Wallis and Choi 2010). The event revealed that a major strength of the film was its capacity to spark public discourse, which is a core principle of journalism's democratic function. "In the middle of the Q&A session, people started arguing with one another about what they thought the film was about, and was it important, and what does it mean" (Wallis and Choi 2010). The activist reform objective of the film inspired serious dialogue on obesity and the complicity of corporate food chains with the problem. "At that moment" Spurlock realized "there's really something to this film" beyond a mere stunt (Wallis and Choi 2010). The film demonstrated how stunt journalism can serve activist agendas, particularly immersion experiments. It became clear to him that significant social, political, and economic change can arise from "not only this specific movie," but in "creating a film that can generate dialogue" (Wallis and Choi 2010).

As a means of generating dialogue, the TV series *30 Days* featured not just Spurlock, but also selected citizens in the role of immersed journalist. The premise of the *30 Days* series, which dares participants to live someone else's life—immersion for one month in an environment antithetical to their own political and cultural biases—engendered precisely the sort of dialogue that followed the pre-screening of *Supersize Me*. The series itself, which dignifies the ghettoized genres of docu-soaps and reality TV by encouraging politically engaged dialogue, focuses on social immersion as a means of cultural education. The opening season's first episode, for example, places Ryan, a resident of Michigan who is a homophobe, in the environment of the Castro district in San Francisco, where he shares a room with a gay man named Ed. "Over the course

of the month, the two of them become friends,” according to Spurlock. The most important outcome was the socio-cultural transformation of Ryan, who “starts to see Ed as a human being” (Wallis and Choi 2010). Larger ideological implications arose in this and other episodes that involved pairing individuals from politically and ethnically antithetical groups. Results exposed how “we create ‘bogeymen’ in America … to drive industry, to drive fear, to drive a war machine that continues to drive profit for a lot of companies.” Social stigmatization fuels xenophobia and racism, leading to partisan polarization on issues such as immigration policy and gay rights legislation (Schiappa et al. 2006). “By creating enemies, we create a definition of ‘us’ and ‘them.’” *30 Days* thus aimed “to bring ‘us’ and ‘them’ together” (Wallis and Choi 2010).

The transforming subjectivity of immersed participants forms the central focus of *30 Days*. In each episode, participants confront lifestyles or political attitudes opposite their own to educate the audience about the issue and, more importantly, to showcase the benefits that accrue from venturing beyond one’s discourse community. The parasocial contact hypothesis, which can reveal core truths of the human condition, drives the show’s activist agenda. According to the hypothesis, media depictions can be a nonthreatening way for people to experience groups about which they hold prejudices. Exposure to pleasing characters should reduce prejudice, as shown in a study of the television program *Will and Grace* (Schiappa et al. 2006). *30 Days* challenged conventional stereotypes relating not only to homophobia, but also abortion, gun control, and illegal immigration. Stereotypes break down through the audience’s parasocial identification with the transformed subject (Baym and Gottert 2013). Pairings in the program focused on major political issues (hunter/PETA advocate; anti-Muslim/Islamic family; anti-illegal immigration activist/family of illegal immigrants), showcasing reconciliation of opposing political perspectives.

After his bold immersion experiment that reformed the most ubiquitous fast food franchise in history, followed by his use of serial thirty-day immersion experiences to mend the increasingly divisive social fabric plaguing contemporary culture and politics, Spurlock turned his attention to corporate control over Hollywood film production. *Pom Wonderful Presents: The Greatest Movie Ever Sold* (2011) developed out of the frustration he encountered seeking funds for his next documentary, leading him to adapt his experimental immersion journalism to probe brands and their manipulation of producers and process of production of the medium itself. His work sheds important light on how filmmakers must rely on corporate funding for production, in the process lending themselves to surreptitious advertising via product placement and sponsored online documentaries.

In *The Greatest Movie Ever Sold*, Spurlock solicits brands that will help fund the film he is making, ones that match his own personal brand identified after extensive psychological profiling by a marketing guru in the film. This comic scenario is one of many reflecting his intent to “attract more people and get people to listen through humor,” because when they laugh, “their guards come

down and they become more receptive,” he explained (Wallis and Choi 2010). Through humorous innuendo, Spurlock has been extraordinarily adept at deconstructing corporate brand messaging. The immersive journalistic method in *The Greatest Movie Ever Sold* aimed at corporate media control over media production, exposing how our films are larded with advertisements, a kind of unwanted byproduct or filler—not unlike the surplus fat and salt on the Super-size McDonald’s menu—whose presence is profit-driven, thus mitigating the staple ingredients of the product itself. The immersed journalist in both cases carries out the industrial logics of consumer culture and production norms. By operating according to industry convention—a project akin to A.J. Jacobs’ *The Year of Living Biblically*, in which the journalist abided by a literalist interpretation of the Bible’s laws and rules for behavior for one year—Spurlock exposes that content marketing revenue is now potent enough to provide not only ancillary funding, but the sole financial source for an entire film. The narrative of the film follows Spurlock into offices of corporate brands seeking product placement deals to fund the very film we are watching.

The capacity to raise awareness through the experience of the immersed journalist is evident in Spurlock’s method of denaturalizing product placement by participating in product placement. “Naturalization” of media images, according to Barthes’ (1977) “The Rhetoric of the Image,” suggests that as technology develops, it provides the means of masking the constructed meaning under the appearance of the given meaning. De-naturalization, therefore, can be understood as “the third meaning” of cinematic narrative. “This dissociation has a de-naturing or at least a distancing effect with regard to the referent (to ‘reality’ as nature, the realist instance),” according to Barthes (1977: 61). “Distanciation is a properly Brechtian method, vital to Brecht because he represents tableau for the spectator to criticize,” Barthes remarked, alluding to Bertolt Brecht’s mid-twentieth-century Epic Theatre and its “alienation [or defamiliarization] effect.” Brecht is famous for his use of placards and for freezing action and overlaying commentary through projections or spoken narration to highlight social and political incongruities and inequities, particularly economic domination and the glamorization of organized crime. Through the use of tableau, graphics, and meta-commentary to interrupt the banal veneer of normalcy by providing meta-commentary on the subtlety of product placement, Spurlock’s narratives similarly “bring out” and make “intellectually visible” meaning “by the very excess of the versions he gives it” (Barthes 1977: 75; Brecht 2001). Spurlock thus operationalizes Brecht’s defamiliarization effect, only with an often self-effacing sense of humor.

Narrative self-reflexivity in *The Greatest Movie Ever Sold* animates Spurlock’s branding quest. The industrial logics of filmmaking exposed through his immersion require self-commodification of the sort currently encouraged in the commercialization of digital culture (Einstein 2016) and self-branding of social media (Benet-Weiser 2012). His postmodern casting of subjectivity

appears ironically in the quest for his personal brand to align with those of corporate investors. The process of independent documentary film production thus follows closely the patterns of consumer culture itself, especially in the project of matching individuals with lifestyle brands. This in effect exposes the process of production as increasingly consumerist, so much so that documentary producers—no matter how self-consciously independent of corporate media—face mounting economic pressure to “shop” for brands to fashion and stylize their messages.

The reporting process for *The Greatest Movie Ever Sold* awakened Spurlock not only to the depth of corporate control over filmmaking and thus the cinematic narratives we consume. It also alerted him to the diversity of corporate brands in the industry. He began with a monolithic understanding of corporations, and emerged with a firm sense that many brands are indeed progressive and worthy of support. Spurlock certainly did not become an apologist for product placement, as some detractors claimed (Buchanan 2011). He did, however, acknowledge the issue from a marketing perspective, which he grew to appreciate from his immersion experience: “As a brand, you look at what’s happening in our country and ask yourself what do you want to have your brand stand for? There’s plenty of content you can get behind to help represent that from a storytelling standpoint” (Brown 2017). Media producers and documentarians must be attentive to the opportunities for such mutually beneficial partnerships, such as Ralph Nader’s endorsement of his film, which also functioned as an endorsement of the brands—including Mini Cooper, Jet Blue, Carrera, and Merrell, among others—underwriting Spurlock’s film.

Critics of Spurlock argued that his exposure of corporate messaging coincided intentionally with his own self-promotion of his film career and status in the culture as a celebrity documentarian. Such allegations reduced *The Greatest Movie Ever Sold* to a disingenuous critique of film industry funding practices and attempted to unmask it as an elaborate marketing and publicity stunt (Buchanan 2011). One online meme portrays him in a caricature as a “Sell Out,” for example, bent on amplifying antimaterialism for its commercial appeal. Ralph Nader’s participation in the project, however, validates the irony of Spurlock’s role as sell-out in the film. Nader seems to revel in the ironic humor of his own participation in celebrity endorsement and product placement for the project, which he sees as a creative expression of his consumer activist objective.

Just as Spurlock willingly compromises his own health in *Supersize Me*, he adopts a business model entirely against his better creative instinct as an independent documentarian by placing his film’s financing in the hands of corporate brands. Yet unlike the McDonald’s experiment, which forced the corporation to drop its Supersize menu items—public outcry prompted a public relations crisis resulting in revised menus (Macarthur 2004)—*The Greatest Movie Ever Sold* touts its partner brands as socially responsible corporate entities.

Companies that cooperated in underwriting the film, of course, condoned its intent to critique the industry's hyper-dependence on product placement to defray production costs. Spurlock's immersion in the world of product placement reveals that he is not too pious to promote worthy brands, signaling to viewers that independent and alternative media can express potent activist and progressive messages from within the film industry's system of production via external corporate sponsorship. The process of journalistic immersion thus reshaped his ideological position toward the economics of film industry production, which he realizes can be done ethically, a point aptly captured in Nader gleefully posing with his new Merrell shoes in the film's final scene.

## Environmental Activism

Unlike Spurlock, Louie Psihogios approaches the progressive activist agenda of his immersion journalism through covert infiltration. Whereas Spurlock's targets such as McDonald's and corporate film underwriters do not operate outside of the law, Psihogios typically aims at surreptitious networks of underground crime. *The Cove*, which won the 2009 Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature, initiated Psihogios' career in journalistic investigation of the endangered species black market. In it, Psihogios' surveillance tactics included shooting in full military camouflage, as he and his crew donned fatigues and face paint to immerse themselves in the jungle adjacent to bloody dolphin slaughter, capturing the atrocities in the water below with long-range cannon-like lenses. The achievement led to *Racing Extinction* (2015) (Figure 8.1), his most ambitious project, offering a broader perspective that included global warming.



**FIGURE 8.1** *Racing Extinction*, 2015

Building on such infiltration tactics in *Racing Extinction*, which debuted in 2015 at the Sundance Film Festival, Psihogios arranged for the construction of a spy vehicle like those featured in James Bond films, only with secret hatch doors for retractable cameras and projectors in place of artillery. Tesla Motors, an environmentalist car producer and worldwide leader in alternative fuel innovation, funded and collaborated with Obscura Digital on the custom-manufactured Tesla Model S specifically for the film. With a robotic arm controlled by a joystick, the vehicle's 1500-lumen video projector can "blast environmental imagery and messaging onto buildings, smokestacks, oil tankers and billboards from NY to LA" (Sepe 2015). Psihogios had made a similar public statement on behalf of conservation in the wake of *The Cove* when he arranged with the mayor of New York City to color with projectors a segment of the urban skyline red, signifying the blood of dolphins that serves as the gruesome leitmotif of the film. For *Racing Extinction*, Psihogios developed the technique further by projecting onto buildings infographics and video of species threatened by the wildlife trade.

Tesla's financial support of the project stemmed from the conservationist ethos at the core of its revolutionary vision for transportation. Use of the Tesla Model S as a mobile film projector combined with planned public events where images of critically endangered or extinct species cloaked buildings representing seats of power from government (the United Nations) and industry (Shell factories, the Empire State Building, and Wall Street) to religion (the Vatican) (Sepe 2015). As a high-tech form of activist graffiti, projected video footage from the car left no trace on the physical environment. But, like traditional graffiti, the projections aggressively seized public space as a canvas for radical messaging, in this case a form of journalistic storytelling on behalf of environmental conservation. Unlike traditional media production vans, which tend to be cumbersome and conspicuous, the Tesla Model S both records and distributes media in addition to functioning as a getaway car, one appropriately driven in the film by vegan NASCAR driver Leilani Munter.

Psihogios evolved the infantry-like tactics of *The Cove* to undercover immersion performed through the use of the Tesla as a "weapon of mass construction" (Sepe 2015). The vehicle simultaneously mobilizes and conceals the presence of the OPS (Oceanic Preservation Society) film crew. Stealth recording of environmental criminal activity is enabled through the car's camera, whose sensor can detect carbon dioxide gas and light in the infrared spectrum. According to Tom Sepe (2015), one of the car's chief designers, the chameleonic vehicle's electro-luminescent paint functions like the skin of a highly adaptable species, providing "a sort of reverse camouflage, allowing us to be seen when we want, or to go dark into ninja mode," a feature that "pays homage to the billions of animals that communicate in the dark depths of the ocean using only bioluminescent light" (Sepe 2015). The extraordinary vehicle in many ways becomes the star of the show, offering Tesla's iconic founder Elon Musk an

ideal product placement in exchange for his celebrity environmentalist endorsement of the film's conservationist message.

As a former photojournalist first for small newspapers and later for *National Geographic*, Psihogios developed his storytelling craft through the image. As his skill with the medium became more sophisticated, so too did his radical environmentalist politics, prompting him to turn to cinema for a more potent storytelling medium, as he explained to me (Dowling 2011). Thus by displaying images of wild animals seemingly torn from the pages of *National Geographic* on New York skyscrapers, he innovated upon his roots in still photography in order to advance the activist agenda of his filmmaking. The "Projecting Change at the Empire State Building" event, for example, was publicized to take place on August 1, 2015 through the hashtag #racingextinction on Twitter. Live video of the event appeared online on the film's website, and photos bore the brand logo of Digital Obscura. As the most aggressively branded and transmediated work of his career, *Racing Extinction*'s title was inspired by the Tesla Model S and its NASCAR driver Leilani Munter, whose competition jumpsuits are emblazed with "Go 100% Renewable," "Vegan Strong," and "Vegan Powered," along with the logos of environmentally responsible brands dedicated to renewable resources. Her website warns, "Never underestimate a vegan hippie chick with a racecar" (Munter 2018). Although they played a minimal role in his early photojournalism as staff member of *National Geographic*, such partnerships and celebrity endorsements proved essential to the film's success.

Psihogios's dramatic flair for grand spectacle is not only evident in the moving portraits of extinct and endangered species projected on the world's most recognizable buildings, but in the theatre of undercover immersion journalism. "Just as *The Cove* took the form of a heist movie, spycraft figures prominently into *Racing Extinction*," which features scenes of covert sting operations with hidden cameras smuggled into sushi bars serving the meat of endangered species, and the infiltration of a Hong Kong factory processing illegal shark fins (Rich 2015). Cameras hidden in buttonholes and bottle caps draw on the genre of espionage thrillers in this highly dangerous form of investigative journalism. Whereas the Japanese seaside enclave of Taiji and its hidden dolphin slaughter operation constitutes the target in *The Cove*, Psihogios aims at a broader range of culprits in *Racing Extinction*, the most conspicuous of which is China. "Just about everything endangered in the world is for sale in China," he reports. "The more illegal it is, the more you have to go to the back rooms," he notes. As his team enters one particularly grisly recess of an animal processing plant, he warns, "We are definitely not welcome here." The scene depicts the dramatic sting operation of a major trafficker in whale sharks, one of China's largest and most lucrative illegal markets. "Nobody had ever gotten back there with a camera before." The crew leader instructs the crew, "if anybody runs into you with badges and uniforms, strip off all this stuff—throw it over the wall" (Psihogios 2015). Infiltration and insinuation in this case bears

no attempt to join forces with the operation over an extended period, as with the prison reportage from the perspective of the guards in Conover and, more recently, Bauer.

Psihoyos has drawn controversy for such tactics that began with *The Cove*. Advocates of Asian culture, for example, argued that Japan has a unique relation to cetaceans totally distinct from that of the USA, which has been crucial in determining the nation's current refusal to cease hunting whales. Despite Psihoyos' sting operations on Japanese violations of environmental law, Japan continues to kill whales "long after the trade in whale oil per se has become economically irrelevant" (Powell 2014). Since the release of *The Cove*, The Japanese Government lists Psihoyos as a potential criminal, not allowing his entrance to the country without first being detained for extensive questioning and searches. In Taiji, where *The Cove* was filmed, Western-style "wanted" posters with mug shots of local fishermen have been posted by the Sea Shepherds and Greenpeace activists, characterizing the villagers according to one local as "a brutal, uncivilized community" (Powell 2014).

Bill Powell's feature for *Newsweek*, whose April 2014 cover read "Twitter Tsunami: A Japanese Fishing Village Unleashes a Social Media Storm," made the bold, against-the-grain attempt to explain, if not excuse, Taiji, the tiny impoverished Japanese community hammered by Westerners, many of them celebrities, through social media for whale and dolphin hunting. He argues that the nation's connection to whales and whaling in fact dates back to a longer and far deeper spiritual history than any in New England, with hand harpoons dating back to as far as 10,000 BC. During World War II, whales made up nearly half of all animal protein consumed in Japan. By 1967, whale consumption persisted to nearly one-quarter of the nation's diet. Charlotte Epstein (2005), in her study of anti-whaling discourse, emphasizes the fact that "Americans had set the Japanese onto whaling after the second World War is something that is often not known," and thus there is a tendency "to blame the Japanese for plundering the sea," despite the fact that Americans at that time "were whaling much harder than that." In contemporary Japan, the essential role of whale and dolphin hunting in rebuilding the nation after World War II means that it is important to the Japanese, who thus feel that "you, the West, are not going to tell us how important it is to us." The prevailing attitude is that "We have been whaling since the sixteenth century, and it is up to us to determine how we get our food" (Epstein 2005: 52). Cultural conflict is evident in the Twitter tsunami that has overwhelmed Taiji, as well as the social media firestorm spurred on by Psihoyos and Ric O'Barry, the hero of *The Cove*, one that crested at 127,000 tweets in February of 2014 alone according to analytics, with celebrities from Caroline Kennedy to Yoko Ono joining the fray (Powell 2014).

Interestingly, Ted Conover has refused the sort of condemnation of individuals, communities, and even entire nations that Psihoyos has engaged in. Conover (2018) warns "not to put yourself up as the hyper-confident hero of

your own tale,” a tendency apparent in Psihogios if not in Spurlock, who foregrounds his flaws—and even pokes fun at them—with total transparency. Conover suggests that the immersed journalist should reserve judgment, particularly of individuals, and instead cast a critical eye toward the system in which they are enmeshed, often so deeply acculturated as to be blind to their crimes. Shane Bauer, clearly in the activist role in “My Four Months as a Private Prison Guard,” “keeps his anger at the guards at a low boil,” despite having been traumatized by guards as a former inmate (Conover 2018). In the post-release communications and publicity campaign for *The Cove*, Psihogios’ Twitter fire-storm risked demonizing Japan for its environmental violations.

### Immersed in Terror

Investigative immersion in the world of terrorism is by nature both dangerous and often embroiled in ethical controversy. Embedded reporting with an unambiguously evil subject such as ISIS to provide the world with astonishing footage of their inside operations appears on the surface a wholly unassailable objective in terms of ethics. Indeed, the only apparent harm in such a project would seem to come at the expense of the journalist, who might risk bodily injury or the lasting repercussions of deep psychological trauma in the form of PTSD. In light of the highly publicized ISIS beheadings of journalists that have gone viral in online videos, *Vice*'s 2014 “The Islamic State” (Figure 8.2), in which reporter Medyan Dairieh spent three weeks embedded with the Islamic State, becoming “the first and only journalist to document its inner workings in Iraq and Syria,” might raise questions about the potentially excessive risks to the



FIGURE 8.2 “The Islamic State,” *Vice*, 2014

journalist in the project. The ethics of an editor sending a reporter into such a situation can indeed be called into question. Yet Dairieh returned safely and the unprecedented documentary launched, offering the most intimate view of twenty-first-century terrorism in the history of media. What *Vice* did not anticipate was its potential violation of federal law.

To promote its milestone achievement in the history of documentary journalism, *Vice* proudly advertised Dairieh's three weeks of embedded coverage of ISIS, which clearly required the terrorist organization's complicity. ISIS clearly saw the project as an opportunity to disseminate propaganda to the world through *Vice*'s massive online audience. *Vice* therefore may have violated federal US law by offering ISIS an opportunity to explain and promote their operation without any critical commentary, voiceover narration, or subtitles delineating moments in the documentary when the group was making distorted propagandistic claims to advance their cause. The law explicitly prohibits "providing material support to designated federal terrorist organizations (FTOs), or even just 'terrorists,'" as March (2014) argued in the *Atlantic*. By providing ISIS an outlet for its views, they may have indeed provided a service to the organization. In defense of their project, *Vice* producers insisted that the interludes in the video when ISIS representatives began delivering propaganda on their behalf did not necessitate any meta-commentary precisely because such moments were so obvious and thus easily recognized by all audiences. But in "explaining, defending, and disseminating a certain [terrorist] point of view" without critique, *Vice* found itself in profound trouble.

At the height of the controversy, *Vice* editor-in-chief Jason Mojica defended the digital news organization on a panel arranged by New York University. When the audience and journalists attending the event accused Mojica of collusion with ISIS, he insisted that there was none whatsoever, and that the relationship was hardly collegial, but instead fraught with tension. He characterized *Vice* as "sparring" with ISIS rather than cooperating with them, because "each of us was probably trying to get something different out of the experience" (Calderone 2014). But when further pressed about the editorial decision not to supply criticism distancing *Vice* from ISIS ideology, he claimed the condition was unique in this case. This "very unique case," he explained, came with "conditions in order to get in and get out with your life." As such, he presumed audiences would automatically understand what was being shown as propaganda and thus chose not to overtly label it as such. What Mojica did not explain, however, was the connection between such "conditions" and his editorial decision to omit propaganda labels and warnings. This clearly raises the question, which went unanswered, as to whether ISIS specifically banned *Vice* from labeling their propaganda and/or critically distancing themselves from it. The piece dangerously veered toward providing publicity on behalf of ISIS, despite Mojica's sense that audiences would understand the immersed journalist's movement from place to place "by a tour guide, by a press officer" and

other similar officials. He even recanted the initial assertion that ISIS propaganda would have been easy to spot by viewers, stating that distinguishing overt propaganda from truth for viewers may not have been so simple and obvious. “It may be a little subtle. We don’t hit you over the head with it. But our goal isn’t to stand there in voiceover … and say ‘Well, this is obviously propaganda.’” Since it was finally unclear as to what Mojica’s range of options were for editing the video given the conditions demanded by ISIS, he could only put his faith in viewers, urging, “we have enough trust in our audience that they can kind of read between the lines” (Calderone 2014).

In explaining how the making of “The Islamic State” posed unique challenges in journalistic ethics, Kevin Sutcliffe, head of news programming for *Vice*, revealed the extreme vulnerability of the news organization and its journalists in the process of production. Perhaps additional space can be allowed given the treacherous terrain *Vice* entered. This environment was of course far more dangerous than the remote Japanese seaside village of Taiji investigated in *The Cove*, and one that approaches a similar category of danger in the underground black market wildlife factories of Hong Kong in *Racing Extinction*. Sutcliffe noted that all excursions within ISIS “are managed trips, so you are there by permission,” in *Vice*’s case, under the direction of press officer Abu Mosa (Calderone 2014). Syrian Government forces reportedly assassinated Mosa just months after the release of the video, an arresting coda that underscores the extreme mortal risk and political repercussions of producing an embedded digital documentary on ISIS, one designed specifically for extensive online circulation (Mosendz 2014).



The immersed journalist increasingly operates on the ethical and narrative boundaries of traditional and digital journalism. The *cinéma vérité* (“true cinema”) tradition of documentary now appears in the many social experiments of immersion projects that proceed from a set of rules and conditions (Baym and Gottert 2013). The immersion journalist often devises such “rules of the game,” as in Spurlock’s thirty-day social experiments of *Supersize Me* and TV series *30 Days*. Subjects themselves can also determine the conditions of filming, as in the business deals struck with cooperating brands in *The Greatest Movie Ever Sold* and the demands of ISIS regulating *Vice*’s coverage of them. Such social experiments bridge the chasm separating serious content from entertainment, a formula particularly effective at generating dialogue in the digital ecosystem.

British documentarian John Grierson (1971) called this the “discourse of sobriety,” a process with both aesthetic and sociological dynamics (207). The cases of immersive longform storytelling examined in this book have illustrated exactly this process by which “a dramatic apprehension of the modern scene might solve the problem” of educating audiences and encouraging civic engagement (Grierson 1971: 207). In this sense, new forms of documentary and nonfictional journalistic narrative have become more engrossing and entertaining

than ever, but in such a way that has revitalized the discourse of sobriety. Media's immersive turn has synthesized "the practice of government and the enjoyment of citizenship" so that the elements of information and entertainment become co-extensive and mutually reinforcing (Grierson 1971: 207).

The immersive longform storytelling movement across media has had both a discursive impact by driving discussion and learned debate on pertinent political issues, and a material impact on both subjects and journalists themselves. New media, technologies, and audiences in the digital age that have evolved toward deep longform storytelling have expanded the narrative capabilities of immersion journalism. As media continues to grow increasingly adept at holding audience attention, whether through digital longform, 360/VR video, interactive documentary, or podcasting, its political influence reaches new heights. Even well-intended progressive production practices, however, can face ethical dilemmas, as journalism grapples with the responsibilities of new media's new storytelling templates. Immersion journalism's return to prominence detailed through the numerous case studies of this book are an extension of the immersive turn in digital media. Charismatic figures at the heart of immersive longform now include journalists themselves, as documentarians and masters of immersive interactive media such as Nonny de la Peña have become celebrities. In this post-“Snow Fall” era, we now witness the efflorescence of nonfiction narratives that take interactivity as a serious component of storytelling (Usher 2016), as the world of gaming and newsgames such as *We Are Chicago* have also taken an immersive turn, extending the influence of narrative digital journalism content toward a new frontier of storytelling in the digital age.

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