



## Can We “Snowfall” This?

Digital longform and the race for the tablet market

David Dowling & Travis Vogan

To cite this article: David Dowling & Travis Vogan (2015) Can We “Snowfall” This?, Digital Journalism, 3:2, 209-224, DOI: [10.1080/21670811.2014.930250](https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2014.930250)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2014.930250>



Published online: 25 Jul 2014.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 3870



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 21 View citing articles [↗](#)

# CAN WE “SNOWFALL” THIS?

## Digital longform and the race for the tablet market

**David Dowling and Travis Vogan**

*The New York Times’ 2012 publication of John Branch’s “Snow Fall: The Avalanche at Tunnel Creek” reinvented the template for digital longform articles designed for the tablet and inspired other media outlets to create similar products. This essay uses three case studies—a legacy newspaper (New York Times), a sports media outlet (ESPN), and a legacy magazine (Sports Illustrated)—to illuminate how different companies use digital longform to build their brands and compete for market share in the wake of “Snow Fall.” Special attention is given to how these companies deploy “Snow Fall’s” signature elements to distinguish their brand identities in the race for the growing demographic of tablet users. As an emblem of its company’s efforts to build journalistic prestige, each work functions as a “cognitive container” in which media add-ons work to hold reader attention rather than scatter it to external Web sources. These examples suggest digital journalism represents an important development in convergence culture and illustrate this emergent form’s industrial, institutional, and cultural uses.*

**KEYWORDS** branding news; cognitive container; digital longform journalism; media industries; narrative journalism; “Snow Fall” (article)

### Introduction

The *New York Times’* December 20, 2012 Pulitzer Prize-winning publication of John Branch’s “Snow Fall: The Avalanche at Tunnel Creek” marked a watershed moment in digital journalism designed for the tablet (Branch 2012). Upon its appearance, pundits and prognosticators rushed in with commentary. Some proclaimed it a harbinger of journalism’s commercial and creative future (Malik 2013; Ray 2013; Rieder 2013; Sonderman 2012; Washeck 2013). Skeptics decried “its flashy visuals as a brash display” (Thompson 2012; Manjoo 2013) and argued that the project demanded resources inaccessible to most budget-strapped and time-constrained news organizations (Lacey 2012; McKenzie 2013). Regardless, “Snow Fall” established a model various media outlets have since mimicked to cultivate a similar sense of prestige. The *New York Times’* then executive editor Jill Abramson claims “Snow Fall” is now a verb used by editors who want to create similarly glitzy and high-profile projects (Abramson 2013). When faced with a major story, editors now reportedly ask their staff: can we “snowfall” this?

This research examines the digital longform market that “Snow Fall” precipitated by considering three case studies that span different, but increasingly convergent,

media industries: the *New York Times*' "Snow Fall" (Branch 2012), Grantland.com's "Into the Great Alone" (Phillips 2013), and *Sports Illustrated*'s "Lost Soul" (Ballard 2013). This emergent genre represents how "formerly separate and distinct storytelling media or platforms ... can be combined into" not only "a new way of providing information," but a novel and important iteration of convergence in journalism (Kolodzy 2006, 6). Comparing these specific artifacts brings into focus this first wave of digital longform's aesthetic features and industrial uses. The differences that separate them illuminate the media outlet's efforts to build brands and compete for market share. More broadly, they demonstrate the industrial, commercial, and cultural ends longform serves in contemporary digital journalism.

"Snow Fall"-inspired projects work to create a highly evolved journalistic product that serves commercial strategies. Chief among these ends is building prestige for a media outlet's brand, which then reflects similar status on readers who share its works through social media. The business model is premised on crafting a signature product that communicates the best articulation of the company's brand identity and draws traffic to its pay site as it passes through social media. In a memo to the *New York Times* staff, the then editor Jill Abramson measured the success of "Snow Fall" in the unprecedented 3.5 million page views it drew and 12 minute average visit, which is more than 10 times the norm (Abramson, as quoted in Romanesco 2012). "Snow Fall," which was distributed for free online, did not collect revenue instantly through micro-payments. Instead, it drove traffic to the *New York Times* site, where its parent company could work to collect new subscriptions. ESPN's Grantland.com and *Sports Illustrated* took close notice of the process, manipulating it to distinguish their brands for the ballooning tablet audience.

### Theorizing Longform for the Tablet

"Longform" is a contested and symbolically loaded term that some have critiqued as a mere buzzword that allows digital outlets to go "long" rather than produce rigorously researched content that necessitates protracted treatment. The *New York Times*' Jonathan Mahler (2014), in fact, decries a "cult of longform" wherein publications overlook journalistic rigor in favor of riding the trendy genre's problematic signification of quality. Longform's increasing currency helps to explain why these varied outlets are suddenly participating in the genre.

Prestige has traditionally been associated with thoroughly researched and reported works that contain extensive analysis and context. Genres such as a "depth reporting" as well as ethnographic participant-observer methods have also reflected credit upon longer journalistic works. Another cultural meaning applied to longform has its roots in the feature story, a genre commonly considered peripheral entertainment that offers indulgent diversion from "hard news" (Lauterer 2006, 122; Sexton 2013). The feature's entertainment roots remain in today's digital longform works, whose narrative-driven stories can expand on rather than digress from pertinent world news while also venturing into obscure territory, as in "Snow Fall," whose story would otherwise remain invisible. The new race for the tablet market draws on both serious in-depth reporting and entertainment by uniting print longform narrative's novelistic technique with cinematic data visualization.

Media scholars and professionals have debated whether an application should strive to be a “cognitive container.” Detractors argue it is “destructive business-wise to put everything behind a closed application which cannot be entered for free” (Kiuttu 2013, 21; also Briggs 2012). Supporters claim it is important to maintain the feel of a container associated with print newspapers “as opposed to the distracting linked nature of the internet” (Kiuttu 2013, 21; also Ahlroth 2011; Mayer 2009; Miller 1955; Roediger and McDermott 1995; Sweller 1994). Others assert that the new business model digital longform for the tablet represents is not driven by advertising revenue. Independent outlets like Atavist, Mediastorm, and Byliner sell longform products individually and via subscription. These companies also provide authors with royalties while controlling their own means of production. Mediastorm sells training materials and resources and Atavist provides access to its production kit, Creativist, for a fee that is often tied to fellowships and other incentives. This 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). Also, digital longform features often operate as loss leaders for their parent companies. In this sense, they do not directly generate profits, but build a branded sense of symbolic capital that leads to economic profits in less direct ways. Symbolic capital, as the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1993, 75) explains, is “economic or political capital that is disavowed, misrecognized and thereby recognized, hence legitimate, a credit which, under certain conditions, and always in the long run, guarantees economic profits.” Digital longform works thus depart from online journalism’s advertisement-littered and click-heavy customs.

The “Snow Fall” template presents a contained multimedia package. The text remains in view for readers, who do not fully leave the publication when accessing its extra-textual features. In some cases the text gives way to a full screen video. But when the clip ends, the screen automatically returns to the text. Along these lines, design elements including scrolling via the “curtain effect” create an immersive environment in which, as Bulger explains, “our attentional focus is contained: it is directed toward the text in front of us, with minimal distraction.” Although the embedded multimedia elements paradoxically may disperse readers’ attention, they do so in ways that encourage them to dive deeper into the narrative world and thus “to immerse ourselves in whatever we are reading” (Bulger 2010).

Just as the 1960s New Journalism represented “a strong break from inverted-pyramid ‘telegraph-ese,’” digital longform—as “Snow Fall” exemplifies the genre—rose with the tablet to make a similar break from the stereotypically distracting and superficial nature of online news that dominated the first decade of the internet (Kovarik 2011, 96). In both cases, longer more expressive forms of journalism paradoxically emerged out of technologies reputed to truncate and radically abridge.

## Method

This comparative case study explains the influence of “Snow Fall” on the rise of digital longform journalism and isolates specific examples of major media industries venturing into the market. We have chosen to analyze digital longform whose parent companies range from legacy print newspaper journalism, the *New York Times*, to the sports media outlet ESPN (owned by Disney), to legacy print sports journalism’s *Sports*

*Illustrated* (owned by Time Warner). Each company comes to digital longform with a unique history, brand, and audience, which combine to impact its articulation of this new hybrid genre.

All selections share outdoor expedition and adventure sports themes. “Snow Fall,” of course, is the selection from the *New York Times* because of its obvious impact on the other media industries, which have followed its aesthetic and technological lead. An early “Snow Fall” imitation came from ESPN’s Grantland.com entitled, “Out in the Great Alone,” a chronicle of the 2012 Iditarod Sled Dog Trail Race in Alaska. Its visuals directly echo, and at times mimic, “Snow Fall.” *Sports Illustrated*’s “Lost Soul” features nautical settings and deals in tragic circumstances. It is no coincidence that sports media outlets were chief among “Snow Fall’s” early imitators. Despite their stereotypically lowbrow reputation, sports media have historically delivered moneyed adult male consumers to advertisers—a traditionally difficult demographic to attract—more effectively than other mainstream media genres (Lowes 1999; McChesney 1989; Powers 1984; Rowe 2007). Moreover, throughout their specific histories ESPN and *Sports Illustrated* have deliberately constructed their content—often in direct opposition to each other—as relatively refined to expand their demographic reach and increase market share (Vogan 2012). ESPN and *Sports Illustrated*’s efforts to “snowfall” extend these long-standing endeavors to build respectability within an industrial context reputed as lacking sophistication and artfulness.

This comparative case study holds constant four generic factors across each story. They (1) occupy multimedia platforms, (2) represent outdoor sports, (3) include dangerous circumstances with elements of mysterious intrigue, and (4) are longform narrative nonfiction. The key points of comparison maximize differences in the industrial uses the “Snow Fall” template serves. Specifically, the pieces add a new dimension to the media outlets’ brands while using those reimagined institutional identities to court the highly valued tablet audience. Thus digital longform is not only the latest journalistic articulation of convergence culture, but a trend that offers unprecedented potential for news and entertainment media organizations to reinvent themselves for the tablet market. The brand-driven differences we find between the pieces coalesce in the competition that uses the “Snow Fall” template to capture and maintain reader interest through multimedia narratives that function as cognitive containers. This containment drives each work’s “stickiness”—a measure based on how much time a reader spends with a text—as well as the likelihood that they will be shared through social media (Ho and Dempsey 2010). Sharing and posting these works contributes to the construction and promotion of the media outlets’ brands while indirectly driving traffic to their parent company’s more advertising-laden—and directly profitable—content (Mitchell, Rosenstiel, and Santhanam 2012; Nelson 2014; Ulin 2014).

## Case Studies

### *The New York Times’ “Snow Fall”*

As the urtext of digital longform, “Snow Fall” represents a significant advance in technical design and storytelling. Developed by former *New York Times* sports and graphics desk editor Joe Sexton, this interactive multimedia feature story of the

February 2012 avalanche that killed 3 of a group of 16 skiers in the Cascade Mountains won the Pulitzer Prize in feature writing. The award committee noted that it was "enhanced by its deft integration of multimedia elements," particularly graphics, animation, and video (as quoted in Haughney 2013).

Each of the multimedia elements in "Snow Fall" performs a range of functions, from scientific data glossing the avalanche description in the text to a video interview with a survivor next to the paragraph that quotes her. These features are in themselves so expertly produced that they could stand alone in succession to create their own documentary narrative of the event. But paired beside John Branch's prose, they have a mutually reinforcing effect whereby media and text trade off playing main and supporting roles, the most notable instance of which features raw footage filmed with a GoPro—a tiny mountable mobile camera—that captures the discovery of a dead skier. Branch's corresponding paragraphs take on a visceral reality in light of the clip that would be difficult to achieve without it. Herein lies the journalistic power of this new form. Such skillful editorial placement of multimedia elements is not the only cause for their heightened effect in "Snow Fall." A team of researchers at the University of California at Berkeley anatomized "Snow Fall" to determine its operative mechanisms in order to understand how they might represent future story structures. They found that the piece operates on three essential technical design components, each of which is used selectively to maximize dramatic effect: videos, scrolling, and the curtain effect (Rue 2013).

When not used as an embedded element appearing in the margins of the story, video plays a crucial role in creating "Snow Fall's" aura. Instead of using only still photographs at the chapter heads, images are animated without sound for several seconds and restart on an automatic loop. In what would otherwise appear to be a photograph, the haunting ethereal quality of that first image, and elsewhere in the piece, utilizes a technological effect typically found not in traditional online news but beside it as animated banner advertisements. Before "Snow Fall," silent animated video playing on loops was primarily a method for online advertisers vying for clicks in what Mark Briggs (2012, 4) calls the "digital Darwinism" of "the attention economy." "Snow Fall" uses this technique as a cinematic establishing shot. The method is reprised throughout the story, particularly at chapter headings and changes of location in the narrative. As scene-setting data visualizations made with computer graphics, "fly-over" topographic maps achieve an effect that resembles a combination of Google Earth satellite mapping and Pixar animation. These maps are essentially animated illustrations that transform the landscape into an instructive chalkboard that traces the path of the skiers along the Cascade Mountains' vast ridges leading to their fatal decent.

Scrolling drives narrative and augments the silent, repetitive, non-narrative videos used to establish setting and mood in "Snow Fall." The particular scrolling mechanism Duenes uses for "Snow Fall," jquery.inview, enables the gradual revelation of image and text that gives the reader a sense of exploration, especially on the tablet (Brown 2013, 2014). Readers advancing through "Snow Fall," sliding the screen upward in effect, move on a visual downward trajectory that signals literal immersion as they venture deeper into the narrative. Use of a mouse to click on arrows and tabs in traditional online news stories distances readers from the text and visuals by comparison. Advancement of the narrative by directly touching the screen offers a more intimate and tactile experience. Delays caused by load time prohibited this technique in the

past, giving way to page tabs for advancing stories and slide shows for multimedia (Rue 2013). Moreover, online news companies often break stories into a greater number of pages to maximize advertising impressions. This reading environment overtly exploits readers' exposure to advertisements, a tactic that Farhad Manjoo (2012) claims has eroded consumers' trust and has been considered repellant and ethically corrosive.

Along with the scroll function that activates maps and graphics, the curtain effect of "Snow Fall" is critical to the cinematic quality it achieves (Rue 2013). This feature makes scrolling more playful by gradually revealing and concealing panels of content, including text and visuals, as the reader scrolls down the page. The reader effectively activates these automatic transitional elements by the simple act of scrolling to advance the narrative. Automatic activation of multimedia add-ons via scrolling adds dynamism to elements that would otherwise require touching, and thus direct interaction. In this manner, overlays of images moving up like a curtain enable some features to work like automatic transmission distinct from others that remain manual, affording the reader the pleasures of both ways of driving through the narrative. Scrolling is thus the linchpin of the unfolding of the narrative both textually and visually as images literally bloom before the user's eyes. The drama of the rising curtain in live theater, and the use of lights to alternately darken and illuminate the stage, constitute the old media converging into this technique.

Derek Thompson (2012) claims that "Snow Fall" "feels more like an interactive documentary that happens to have paragraphs than a newspaper story that happens to have interactives." But rather than displacing the written word or robbing it of its power, "Snow Fall" converges the powerful elements of old media such as print and theater and honors the diverse forms of literacy that mark twenty-first-century audiences. Like television, with the "seemingly inexhaustible diversions" it supplies, the internet is a medium that has "not sufficiently recognized the power of moving images," according to Mitchell Stephens (1998, 7). Reading through graphics and interactive multimedia draws from the conventions of documentary film, particularly works saturated in primary source documents, interviews, and data visualization. Digital long-form journalism's use of documentary film conventions, especially those that lay bare their sources, provides a visceral nearness to the subject.

In unleashing the full power of the visual, especially through techniques such as the curtain effect, which is a direct nod to the movie theater curtain and cinema's use of the wipe as a transition device, the textual is not replaced. Instead, this is precisely an instance of the converged media Jenkins describes. As Jenkins and Kelley (2013, 11) suggests, in contrast to the "premise that the new digital mind will render the literary mind obsolete," works like "Snow Fall" provide an environment in which "new media literacies build on older print based literacies [to] deepen and enrich human consciousness, and push back on those that trivialize and distract."

At 3.5 million page views and 12 minutes per view, "Snow Fall" helped buttress the *New York Times*' venerable brand by re-inventing the newspaper feature story in an immersive digital format (Romanesco 2012). "Snow Fall" specifically expanded the *New York Times*' reputation beyond "the gray lady" associated with its breaking print news into an entertaining product that still retained its distinction for rigorous reporting. "Snow Fall" might also be considered a digital extension of the *New York Times*' extremely profitable *New York Times Magazine*, which accompanies the Sunday edition and has been a perennial source of advertising revenue. "Snow Fall" funneled into the *New*

*York Times'* promotional engine by becoming one of the most forwarded pieces in the history of online news. A quarter to a third of the views it attracted were new visitors to [newyorktimes.com](http://newyorktimes.com) (Romanesco 2012).

### *Grantland.com's "Out in the Great Alone"*

Brian Phillips' "Out in the Great Alone," published just six months after "Snow Fall," appears a derivative imitation of the *New York Times'* renowned work of digital longform. Its unexpected distinction within the digital longform market, however, is its literary prowess. Grantland, a boutique site edited and overseen by famous ESPN blogger Bill Simmons, is organized in large part around the effort to build a sense of literary refinement for its corporate parent. This effort is embedded in the website's name, which pays homage to the canonical sportswriter Grantland Rice while suggesting it grows out of his celebrated style. Beyond its appellation, it employs a roster of well-known editors and staff writers, engages the sports writing tradition, and publishes a print quarterly. While most of the practices Grantland employs to build refinement appeal to sports media's hallowed past, its effort to "snowfall" "Out in the Great Alone" evidences an engagement with digital journalism's vanguard that places the website into association with the *New York Times*.

Such an association appears an attempt to model the dramatic GoPro clip in "Snow Fall" in Brian Phillips' "Out in the Great Alone." In it, Phillips stumbles from the small single propeller plane that just made an emergency landing while surveying the Iditarod competition. Breathless, he staggers about filming an empty snowfield. The scene is without consequence, however, since the plane has landed and its passengers are ostensibly safe, except for nausea Phillips suffered on the decent. What is authentic raw footage in the "Snow Fall" GoPro segment depicting the discovery of buried skiers becomes in Phillips' hands a comparatively hollow fabrication.

As the multimedia elements are uneven in Phillips' story, its writing bears the mark of Grantland's association with the sports blogging industry as well as the website's attempt to distinguish itself as a venue that produces literary sports journalism. The ESPN brand is articulated through Phillips' rendering of the sports blogging journalistic voice Simmons made famous. Thus "Out in the Great Alone" displays language associated with Simmons' market-tested vernacular, as it ranges from colloquial snark to far-fetched analogy and makes use of the second-person singular "you" exactly 197 times. In describing one musher's technique, the prose transforms into sports blog banter: "You know the story of the tortoise and the hare? Yeah, the hare *definitely* wins the Iditarod. Slow and steady is not the ticket in the long-distance dog-mushing game. You want a lot of naps punctuated by periods of hellish subzero hustling" (Phillips 2013). The writing taps into the sports idiom typical of social media, complete with direct address and cocky assuredness of the man who knows the score and can speak to the realities of the sport's strategic dimensions.

In reinforcing the sports blogger's immediate voice, Phillips makes no pretense of journalistic objectivity when asked if he had exchanged notes with *New Yorker* journalist Ben McGrath, who was also covering the race. "From the outset, it was clear that Ben had actual professional journalistic skills and knew how to, for example, 'interview someone,' whereas most of my time at checkpoints was spent in various stages of



skulking and/or getting lost,” Phillips confessed (Weintraub 2013). Passages remain unedited precisely for their unpolished blog-like feel: “Flying through the pass was—how can I put this—awesome. I mean in the sense of inspiring genuine awe ... It’s hard to explain” (Phillips 2013). Other more obvious instances of ESPN branding are obsequious. In describing one musher, he asks the reader, “Do you remember him? He got nominated for a couple of ESPYs [ESPN awards] a few years back” (Phillips 2013). The veritable product placement relays a world wherein ESPN is the authority on sport’s meaning and history.

The dialectic of Phillips’ literary method, however, is rich enough to range from colloquial blogging to literary allusion. The result meshes with what Robert Boynton (2005, xi) calls the New New Journalism, the movement personified by Jon Krakauer, Susan Orlean, Ted Conover, and others, who fuse the license to experiment established by 1960s-era New Journalism with the social and political consciousness of Gilded Age and Progressive Era writers such as Rebecca Harding Davis and Lincoln Steffens. Phillips harnesses intimacy with loosely structured, wide-ranging, impressionistic segments that represent a noticeable contrast to the more traditional approach of McGrath’s (2013) *New Yorker* story on the same race. Compared to the emotional impact of witnessing the race from above in a small airplane Phillips renders, McGrath’s journalism offers an earthier detailed account from the ground, using the race as a window into the participants’ unique stories and motives. While Phillips is by no means attempting a Gonzo approach to the Iditarod, he is unleashing his full range of expressive skills, including scene building and dialogue for what Robert Boynton (2013) calls “supreme nonfiction,” digital longform for the tablet that expands the achievements of journalistic experimentation visible in Krakauer’s *Into Thin Air* and Sebastian Junger’s *The Perfect Storm* by putting the author at the center of the story, channeling characters’ thoughts, and using nonstandard punctuation (Boynton 2005, xii). Further, Phillips’ subject holds constant with the other case studies through his concern for the sociology of the fringe, as Iditarod competitors represent a subculture of outdoor adventurers akin to the back-country skiers of “Snow Fall,” and the romantically inclined like Bison Dele of *Sports Illustrated*’s “Lost Soul.”

Phillips also explicitly allies his project with literary traditions to code his work as literary journalism. His allusion in the prologue to Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* initiates a series of such references that course throughout the piece. He also roots himself in the tradition of nonfiction polar expedition narratives including Apsley Cherry-Garrard’s early twentieth-century memoir *The Worst Journey in the World*, and the story of James Clark Ross’ charting of the coast of Antarctica in 1845. A similar literary ambiguity is captured in his description of the unfamiliar faces of Alaskans, “the *terra incognita* of every gaze, Saul Bellow calls it” (Phillips 2013). The graphic design attempts to enhance the story’s literary component, as “Essential Robert Service” is the heading of a bullet list of lines from the poet with a link to his complete works on the homepage of the Poetry Foundation. The bullet list renders Service’s verse in a digitized PowerPoint-like format of excerpted lines to call attention to the poetic resonance of Phillips’ subjective interior ruminations.

Animated video and data visualization techniques patterned after “Snow Fall” work to enhance “Out in the Great Alone’s” panoramic moving topographical maps with expansive photographic features taken from Phillips’ point of view in the plane. The emphasis on Phillips’ subjectivity aims to distill the reading experience into the

narrative equivalent of watching well-shot GoPro footage. His discussion also contains hyperlinks to relevant news stories. “Snow Fall,” by comparison, shields readers from such portals to traditional online news and data to maintain a story world consisting of self-produced effects, reportage, and artifacts. Unlike “Snow Fall,” most add-ons in Phillips’ work are not primary source material, but explanatory. Moreover, many of its links lead out into the Web to other hosts rather than providing the firsthand artifact itself contained within ESPN’s digital domain.

This is not to suggest, however, that ESPN’s entrance into the market was superficial. Instead, it was the latest of ESPN’s broader efforts to expand its ever-widening compass of media platforms—a palette that traverses television, print, radio, and online and social media. “Out in the Great Alone” is thus consonant with Grantland’s editorial vision, as described by Bill Simmons (2014): “We want to distinguish ourselves by being thoughtful and entertaining. We want to keep surprising people. We want to keep taking risks. That’s one of the reasons why we created Grantland.” Entering the longform digital market was precisely one of those risks taken for the sake of surprising readers with thoughtful content—or at least with content packaged as thoughtful. “Out in the Great Alone” thus stands as ESPN’s experimental run at “snowfalling” a feature story. Insofar as it embodies Grantland’s effort to cultivate status as an exceptionally artful site of online sports media, the piece reflects ESPN’s ambitions to play on the same industrial, cultural, and aesthetic turf as the *New York Times*. This effort reinforces the media outlet’s broader ambition to cultivate and assert its position as “The Worldwide Leader in Sports.”

### *Sports Illustrated’s “Lost Soul”*

In October 2013, *Sports Illustrated* debuted its “Longform Since 1954,” an initiative that exploits longform’s meaning to suggest the magazine had been producing such relatively complex works for decades. *Sports Illustrated* established its brand of digital longform inspired by “Snow Fall” first through the frequency of production, defying all predictions that to “snowfall” a project was a massively time-consuming undertaking. True to its deadline-driven identity as a weekly product, *Sports Illustrated* produced four digital longform works that it proudly advertised in its November 4, 2013 issue under the heading “Going Deep,” a clear reference to the immersive experience associated with digital longform. *Sports Illustrated* had a far greater incentive than Grantland to rush into the digital longform market, because the tablet and multimedia stories represent an increasingly vital revenue source for the magazine industry in the digital age. Further, by naming its new department Longform Since 1954, *Sports Illustrated* suggests it is the originator of longform sports journalism, a gesture akin to ESPN naming its website after Rice. Indeed, it uses longform’s cachet to expand on its traditional reputation as a relatively highbrow sports publication that historian Michael MacCambridge (1998, 63) claims was designed “for the ‘martini’ set rather than the ‘beer and pretzel’ gang.”

“Lost Soul,” *Sports Illustrated*’s second digital longform instalment, appeared on October 18, 2013, just ten days after the publication of its debut piece, “The Ghost of Speedy Cannon.” The piece’s rapid production betrays the uniqueness of *Sports Illustrated*’s approach to digital longform. *Sports Illustrated* can select from its considerable archive of longform stories—available to the public online via its “SI Vault”—and

"snowfall" them. *Sports Illustrated's* original print piece on Dele, Grant Wahl's "The Mysterious Case of Bison Dele," was published on September 30, 2002, 11 years prior to Chris Ballard's digitized update with "Lost Soul." Like the other installations in Longform Since 1954, no new reporting was necessary to produce the article. Indeed, any concern for a lack of timeliness in these stories is moot. The digital longform genre is untethered to the breaking news cycle. This explains why readers of longform, according to Boynton, "care more about writers and their subjects than when, where, and how the story was published" and thus have made works like George Orwell's 1946 essay "Why I Write" one of the most frequently visited pieces on Longform.com (Boynton 2013). Indeed, the subject of "Lost Soul" is the death of Bison Dele, the NBA star formerly known as Brian Williams who went missing near Tahiti on his catamaran in 2002. The unsolved mystery, like the department's other digital longform subjects, is clearly not part of the breaking weekly news cycle to which *Sports Illustrated* must attend in its main coverage.

Unlike Phillips' piece, "Lost Soul" is reported in the third person. The first portion provides background on Dele's romantic inclinations and the final third delves into the mystery of his death. No such intrigue, beyond the psychological and the literary, is included in Grantland's Iditarod coverage. "Lost Soul" also makes impressive use of the scrolling and curtain effects. For instance, it complements its subject's haunting suggestion of fratricide in the decomposition of a childhood photo of Dele and his brother. The cause of Dele's death is still unsolved, and thus the story unfolds a variety of fascinating theories from the perspectives of his family, loved ones, and a host of his friends and associates. Compelling evidence abounds, inviting the reader to solve the mystery. A scanned-in forged check, Dele's passport, a biographical pullout on his jazz musician father are all strategically embedded for a coherent narrative effect. Unlike Phillips' piece, the links are contained within the story.

"Lost Soul" uses a story from *Sports Illustrated's* archives to signal that the magazine's rich history in print longform journalism is well suited to the "Snow Fall" template. The fact that Wahl's earlier rendition of the story originally appeared in the magazine in 2002 as "The Mysterious Case of Bison Dele" indicates *Sports Illustrated's* concern for establishing its current digital brand as a function of its own past, a heritage it constructs as exceptionally literary. The product's emphasis is that its longform tradition is timeless in its journalistic integrity, and that enduring quality is readily translatable to the tablet, especially given its visual orientation toward *illustration*, as the magazine's moniker suggests. *Sports Illustrated's* branding strategy in this case differs from Grantland's in that such stories as "Lost Soul" are critical to its future in the burgeoning market for "digital magazines" (Nyhan 2014). Grantland, on the other hand, never had a print past, although its branding suggests it grows out of a distinctly literary tradition of sports writing. Through works such as "Lost Soul," *Sports Illustrated* aims to import its august reputation as one of the oldest print sports weeklies into new branded online initiatives that move away from traditional reporting and newsgathering routines.

## Conclusion

Digital longform stories like "Snow Fall," "Out in the Great Alone," and "Lost Soul" function as opportunities for these prominent media organizations to build a branded

sense of renown in an increasingly competitive market. Sports media's focus on the adult male demographic overlaps with the tablet's market and informs ESPN and *Sports Illustrated's* relatively early entrances into this emerging genre. However, many other media outlets with diverse brands and institutional histories—a roster that includes SB Nation, Business Insider, BuzzFeed, and The Huffington Post—are entering this market and putting their own aesthetic spins on the genre that are shaped by their individualized priorities.

"Snow Fall" was a windfall for the *New York Times* and in effect reinvented the company as bearer of digital journalism's future. Indeed, the *New York Times* justified its decision to increase print subscription rates in part by touting "Snow Fall" as its most significant achievement, highlighting it among 112 Pulitzers the paper won in 2013. "One of those 2013 honors was for 'Snow Fall,' a powerful multimedia story, which reflected our continuing investment in revelatory reporting across print and digital formats," as Senior Vice President and Chief Consumer Officer Yasmin Namini's (2013) justification of the hike in rates read, which ironically defended the increased price of the print paper based on the power of its most famous digital feature story.

To "snowfall" a work, then, means to put one's best product in the market in a way that participates in these trends in digital design and narrative while building and communicating an organization's brand. Grantland and *Sports Illustrated* have "snowfalled" by packaging longform features into multimedia products that reflect a level of sophistication commensurate with the presumed tastes of the tablet audiences they seek and that is more prestigious than stereotypical sports writing. Literary sophistication with a contemporary blogging edge in Phillip's "Out in the Great Alone" reinforces Grantland's broader marketing strategy, while *Sports Illustrated* has rebooted an old piece to broadcast its celebrated journalistic roots. Along with these two companies, the *New York Times* sees its future as digital, and as such has moved forward with its best tablet-driven product. The success of "Snow Fall," and the works it has inspired, lies not in the immediate revenue it can earn through advertisements, but in the brand recognition it can attach to a product designed for the tablet, a technology these companies recognize as holding not only a coveted demographic of readers, but digital journalism's future. These works, in turn, encourage reader-driven circulation via social media, a process that expands the products' reach and allows consumers to cultivate their own identities by associating with such artifacts.

Digital longform producers not only gain wider brand exposure by targeting readers who circulate news stories frequently through social media such as Twitter; they also reach an audience that shows an increased willingness to pay for their news (Mitchell, Christian, and Rosenstiel 2011). For digital longform, social media thus operate beyond their function as "a mechanism to distribute breaking news quickly and concisely" and instead provide a "marketing and interactive platform with which [news organizations] can convince new customers to pay for their content through innovative marketing and advertising campaigns" (Goyanes 2014, 1). A 2011 Pew study further confirmed the importance of stories bearing an appealing brand in this process. Brands are particularly important to tablet users, who read news on purchased apps at higher rates than non-tablet users: "Liking the news organization is a major factor for 84% of those who have apps" they purchased (Mitchell, Christian, and Rosenstiel 2011). Winning readers' affection through what Henry Jenkins (2007, 70) calls "love marks" is achieved through the communication of brand values that audiences will love as well

as respect. Digital longform thus represents a major shift away from brief breaking news toward a business model built on a carefully crafted multimedia product sensitive to users' appreciation of multimedia narrative aesthetics.

Longform's combination of learned and entertaining material is visible in the demographic of tablet readers, who typically read individual stories at length on their devices during leisure hours that coincide with those of primetime television watchers. Whereas digital reading has been criticized for encouraging haste and superficiality, the movement toward longform has given rise to a new premium on media products' stickiness. Building audience loyalty is not specific to digital newspaper and magazine companies, but is also used in the television industry, where social media similarly functions as a marketing strategy to lengthen the time of each view to build message board activity into a community of fans (Andrejevic 2008). Digital longform's quest for stickiness among readers appears to be working. A Localytics study, for example, found that people spend two and a half times longer using iPad news applications than other types of iPad apps (Fidler 2012; Ruby 2011). Aggregators such as Longform.org reinforce these practices. In 2012, for example, 65 percent of Longform's readers completed every 2000 plus-word story they read (Boynton 2013, 130). Robert S. Boynton (2013, 130) describes longform's demographic as "the envy of any advertiser": 50 percent are under 34, 30 percent read mainly on phones and tablets, and 42 percent have attended graduate school. The mobile reading industry has responded with products designed to absorb these readers in not just the plain text stories like those of Longform.org, but narrative enhanced by multimedia technology. Those media add-ons, this research demonstrates, function to contain cognitive interest within the territory of the work rather than disperse it onto external Web sources.

News designed for the Web moves in the other direction, especially when placed on sites that draw revenues from click-through rates. Media analysts have criticized such online news as inherently distracting (Briggs 2012; Carr 2011). It is typically surrounded by advertisements and hypertext links that send the reader away from the primary text. Nicholas Carr (2011, 116) reports that "dozens of studies by psychologists, neurobiologists, educators, and web designers point to the same conclusion: when we go online, we enter an environment that promotes cursory reading, hurried and distracted thinking, and superficial learning." "Snow Fall" and its imitators counter these trends by fostering a "cognitive container" with fewer portals to the Web (Kiuttu 2013, 21). "Snow Fall" graphics director Steve Duenes claims the *New York Times* design team sought to create an immersive reading environment free from the distractions that impede upon most Web articles. Duenes described "Snow Fall" as an attempt to "find ways to allow readers to read into, and then through multimedia, and then out of multimedia." Multimedia accouterments would not pull the reader away from the text, he explained, but draw them back into it "so it didn't feel like you were taking a detour, but the multimedia was part of the one narrative flow" (Sonderman 2012). The capacity to view multimedia without leaving the story presents itself as key to the immersive reading associated with the tablet. This shows that extended time spent with the text is a novel development in online reading, which has typically been associated with relatively superficial skimming. A 2012 Pew research survey found that "Tablet users in particular tend to read longer, more in-depth articles and 69 percent read a full article when browsing through headlines." Among those readers, "78 percent read more than

one in-depth piece in a sitting and 72 percent read in-depth articles they weren't seeking out to begin with" (Mitchell, Rosenstiel, and Santhanam 2012).

Consumers are not as superficial as early internet news platforms might indicate. They now demand immersive media and news organizations have responded by reviving the longform feature. Currently, the high price of tablets and limitations of broadband have made the tablet market the domain of the privileged. Trends toward mass-producing tablets in a more cost-efficient way promise to bring prices down so that in the future they might be as ubiquitous as smartphones are now. Broadband access is also expanding, as many cities have invested in free internet services to bridge the digital divide. Digital longform, further, is not as painstaking and labor intensive as the year-long project of creating "Snow Fall" with 30 staff might indicate. *Sports Illustrated's* rate of production, as discussed earlier, refutes the argument that "Snow Fall" is not a worthy template for news organizations to invest in. But "snowfalling" is not without its costs. "Can we 'snowfall' this?" is a question that implies a budgetary and staff investment, one whose demands are less prohibitive as the use of Scrollkit as a production shortcut has proven.

Beyond commenting on "Snow Fall" and the longform journalism it inspired, this research illuminates an industry in a state of cultural and technological transformation. The then *New York Times* editor Jill Abramson described the unprecedented reception of "Snow Fall" as "a cool moment in the evolution of our online storytelling." Her enthusiasm could hardly be contained as the piece drew 2.9 million visits. "At its peak as many as 22,000 users visited 'Snow Fall' at any given time" (as quoted in Romanesco 2012). "Snow Fall" has become an advertisement for the *New York Times* forged through the sports and graphics desk to tap into sports media's popularity and profitability. ESPN and *Sports Illustrated* picked up on this and were thus some of the earliest to reach for the digital longform horizon. And an increasing slate of publications are now answering in the affirmative to the question: can we "snowfall" this?

## REFERENCES

- Abramson, Jill. 2013. "Interview." *Wired Business Conference*, May 7. <http://wiredbusinessconference.com/media.html>
- Ahlroth, Jussi. 2011. *The Nine Commandments for Newspapers on Tablet Devices*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism Fellowship Paper: University of Oxford.
- Andrejevic, Mark. 2008. "Watching Television without Pity: The Productivity of Online Fans." *Television and New Media* 9 (1): 24–46.
- Ballard, C. 2013. "Lost Soul." *Sports Illustrated*, October 18. <http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/longform/bison-dele/>.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1993. *The Field of Cultural Production*. Translated by Randal Johnson. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Boynton, Robert. 2005. *The New New Journalism: Conversations with America's Best Nonfiction Writers on Their Craft*. New York: Vintage.
- Boynton, Robert. 2013. "Notes toward a Supreme Nonfiction: Teaching Literary Reportage in the Twenty-first Century." *Literary Journalism Studies* 5 (2): 125–131.
- Branch, John. 2012. "Snow Fall: The Avalanche at Tunnel Creek." *New York Times*, December 20. <http://www.nytimes.com/projects/2012/snow-fall/#/?part=tunnel-creek>



- Briggs, Mark. 2012. *Entrepreneurial Journalism: How to Build What's Next for News*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Brown, Cody. 2013. "The New York times Told Me to Take This down." *Medium*, June 27. <https://medium.com/meta/503b9c22080b>
- Brown, Cody. 2014. "Life Timeline." <http://codybrown.name>
- Bulger, Monica. 2010. "Managing Distraction: Reading in the Age of the App." *Monica Bulger's Thoughts on Digital Literacy*, May 25. <http://monicabulger.com/category/cognition/>.
- Carr, Nicholas. 2011. *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*. New York: Norton.
- Fidler, Roger. 2012. "RJI-DPA Tablet Research Project." *David W. Reynolds Journalism Institute*, May 4. <http://www.rjionline.org/news/rji-dpa-tablet-research-project>
- Goyanes, Manuel. 2014. "An Empirical Study of Factors that Influence the Willingness to Pay for Online News." *Journalism Practice*. doi:10.1080/17512786.2014.882056
- Haughney, Christine. 2013. "Times Wins Four Pulitzers." *New York Times*, April 15. [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/16/business/media/the-times-wins-four-pulitzer-prizes.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/16/business/media/the-times-wins-four-pulitzer-prizes.html?_r=0).
- Ho, Jason Y. C., and Melanie Dempsey. 2010. "Viral Marketing: Motivations to Forward Online Content." *Journal of Business Research* 63 (9–10): 1000–1006.
- Jenkins, Henry. 2007. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press.
- Jenkins, Henry, and Wyn Kelley, eds. 2013. *Reading in a Participatory Culture: Remixing Moby-Dick in the English Classroom*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Kiuttu, Saila. 2013. *Integrate Multimedia, Make Fingers Happy: Journalistic Storytelling on Tablets*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism Fellowship Paper, University of Oxford.
- Kolodzky, J. 2006. *Convergence Journalism: Writing and Reading Across the News Media*. Lanham, MD: Rowan and Middlefield.
- Kovarik, Bill. 2011. *Revolutions in Communication: Media History from Gutenberg to the Digital Age*. New York: Bloomsbury.
- Lacey, Sarah. 2012. "Snow Fall: Finally an Articulation for the Digerati of What a Big, Expensive Newsroom Can Do." *Pando Daily*, December 21. <http://pando.com/2012/12/21/snow-fall-finally-an-articulation-for-the-digerati-of-what-a-big-expensive-newsroom-can-do/>
- Lauterer, Jock. 2006. *Community Journalism: Relentlessly Local*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Lowes, Mark D. 1999. *Inside the Sports Pages: Work Routines, Professional Ideologies and the Manufacture of Sports News*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- MacCambridge, Michael. 1998. *The Franchise: A History of Sports Illustrated Magazine*. New York: Hyperion.
- Mahler, Jonathan. 2014. "When 'Long-form' is Bad Form." *New York Times*, January 24. [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/25/opinion/when-long-form-is-bad-form.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/25/opinion/when-long-form-is-bad-form.html?_r=0)
- Malik, Om. 2013. "How the New York Times Can Fight BuzzFeed and Reinvent Its Future." *Gigaom*, May 10. <http://gigaom.com/2013/05/10/how-the-new-york-times-can-fight-buzzfeed-reinvent-its-future/>
- Manjoo, Farhad. 2012. "Stop Pagination Now: Why Websites Should Not Make You Click and Click for the Full Story." *Slate*, October 1. [http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/technology/2012/10/website\\_pagination\\_stories\\_should\\_load\\_into\\_a\\_single\\_page\\_every\\_time\\_.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/technology/2012/10/website_pagination_stories_should_load_into_a_single_page_every_time_.html)

- Manjoo, Farhad. 2013. "A Whole Lot of Bells, Way Too Many Whistles: Multimedia-Laden Features like "Snow Fall" and "The Jockey" Are Bad for the Web and Bad for Readers." *Slate*, August 15. [http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/technology/2013/08/snow\\_fall\\_the\\_jockey\\_the\\_scourge\\_of\\_the\\_new\\_york\\_times\\_bell\\_and\\_whistle.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/technology/2013/08/snow_fall_the_jockey_the_scourge_of_the_new_york_times_bell_and_whistle.html)
- Mayer, Richard E. 2009. *Multimedia Learning*. 2nd ed. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- McChesney, Robert W. 1989. "Media Made Sport: A History of Sports Coverage in the United States." In *Media, Sports, and Society*, edited by Lawrence A. Wenner, 49–69. London: Sage.
- McGrath, Ben. 2013. "The White Wall." *New Yorker*, April 22. [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2013/04/22/130422fa\\_fact\\_mcgrath](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2013/04/22/130422fa_fact_mcgrath).
- McKenzie, Hamish. 2013. "Sorry, 'Snow Fall' Isn't Going to save the New York Times." *Pando Daily*, May 13. <http://pando.com/2013/05/13/sorry-snow-fall-isnt-going-to-save-the-new-york-times/>
- Miller, George A. 1955. "The Magical Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two: Some Limits on Our Capacity for Processing Information." *Psychological Review* 18 (101): 343–352.
- Mitchell, Amy, Leah Christian, and Tom Rosenstiel. 2011. "The Tablet Revolution: How People Use Tablets and What It Means for the Future of the News." *Pew Research Journalism Project*, October 25. <http://www.journalism.org/2011/10/25/tablet/>
- Mitchell, Amy, Tom Rosenstiel, and Laura Houston Santhanam. 2012. "The Future of Mobile News: The Explosion of Mobile Audiences and a Close Look at What It Means for News." *Pew Research Journalism Project*, October 1. <http://www.journalism.org/2012/10/01/future-mobile-news/>
- Namini, Yasmin. 2013. "Letter to Subscribers." *New York Times*, December 15.
- Nelson, Elissa. 2014. "Windows into the Digital World: Distributor Strategies and Consumer Choice in an Era of Connected Viewing." In *Connected Viewing: Selling, Streaming, and Sharing Media in the Digital Era*, edited by Jennifer Holt and Kevin Sanson, 62–78. New York: Routledge.
- Nyhan, Brendan. 2014. "Putting the Bundle back together." *Columbia Journalism Review*, February 11. [http://www.cjr.org/united\\_states\\_project/putting\\_bundle\\_back\\_together\\_when\\_newspapers\\_close\\_civic\\_engagement\\_declines.php](http://www.cjr.org/united_states_project/putting_bundle_back_together_when_newspapers_close_civic_engagement_declines.php).
- Phillips, Brian. (2013). "Out in the Great Alone." *ESPN Grantland*, May 9. [http://sports.espn.go.com/espn/grantland/story/\\_/id/9175394/out-great-alone](http://sports.espn.go.com/espn/grantland/story/_/id/9175394/out-great-alone).
- Powers, R. 1984. *Supertube: The Rise of Television Sports*. New York: Coward-McCann.
- Ray, Vin. 2013. "News Storytelling in a Digital Landscape." In *Journalism: New Challenges*, edited by Karen Fowler-Watt and Stuart Allen Bournemouth, 435–443. UK: Bournemouth University Press.
- Rieder, Rem. 2013. "Long-form Journalism Makes Comeback." *USA Today*, June 5. <http://www.usatoday.com/story/money/columnist/2013/06/05/rem-riederlongform/2389995/>.
- Roediger, Henry L., and Katherine B. McDermott. 1995. "Creating False Memories: Remembering Words not Presented in Lists." *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition* 17 (21): 803–814.
- Romanesco, Jim. 2012. "More than 3.5 Million Page Views for New York Times' 'Snow Fall' Feature." *Jimromanesco.Com*, December 27. <http://jimromanesco.com/2012/12/27/morethan-3-5-million-page-views-for-nyts-snow-fall/>
- Rowe, David. 2007. "Sports Journalism: Still the 'Toy Department' of the News Media." *Journalism* 8 (4): 385–405.



- Ruby, D. 2011. "Games, News Apps Top iPad's User Engagement Categories." *Localytics*, August 23. <http://www.localytics.com/blog/2011/games-news-apps-top-ipad-user-engagement-categories/>
- Rue, Jeremy. 2013. "The 'Snow Fall' Effect and Dissecting the Multimedia Longform Narrative." *Multimedia Shooter*, April 21. <http://multimediashooter.com/wp/2013/04/21/the-snow-fall-effect-and-dissecting-the-multimedia-longform-narrative/>
- Sexton, Joe. 2013. "Interview, the Future of Digital Longform. Tow Center for Digital Journalism." <http://cu.jtw/1c9siym>
- Simmons, Bill. 2014. "The Dr. V Story: A Letter from the Editor." *Grantland*, January 20. <http://grantland.com/features/the-dr-v-story-a-letter-from-the-editor/>
- Sonderman, Jeff. 2012. "'How the New York Times' 'Snow Fall' Project Unifies Text, Multimedia." *Poynter*, December 20. <http://www.poynter.org/latest-news/top-stories/198970/how-the-new-york-times-snow-fall-project-unifies-text-multimedia/>
- Stephens, Mitchell. 1998. *The Rise of the Image, the Fall of the Word*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sweller, John. 1994. "Cognitive Load Theory, Learning Difficulty, and Instructional Design." *Learning and Instruction* 4 (4): 295–312.
- Thompson, Derek. 2012. "Snow Fall Isn't the Future of Journalism." *The Atlantic*, December 21. <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2012/12/snow-fall-isnt-the-future-of-journalism/266555/>
- Ulin, Jeff. 2014. *The Business of Media Distribution: Monetizing, Film, TV, and Video Content in an Online World*. Burlington, MA: Focal Press.
- Vogan, Travis. 2012. "ESPN Films and the Construction of Prestige in Contemporary Sports Television." *International Journal of Sport Communication* 5 (2): 137–152.
- Washeck, Angela. 2013. "Longform Journalism is Alive and Well, Say Co-founders of Byliner, Atavist." *Media Bistro*, July 23. [http://www.mediabistro.com/10000words/longformjournalismbylineratavist\\_b21232](http://www.mediabistro.com/10000words/longformjournalismbylineratavist_b21232).
- Weintraub, Robert. 2013. "Room for Two: New Yorker, Grantland Go Head to Head on Iditarod Coverage." *Columbia Journalism Review*, April 30. [http://www.cjr.org/full\\_court\\_press/new\\_yorker\\_grantland\\_match\\_wit.php?page=all&print=true](http://www.cjr.org/full_court_press/new_yorker_grantland_match_wit.php?page=all&print=true)

**David Dowling** (author to whom correspondence should be addressed), School of Journalism & Mass Communication, University of Iowa, USA. E-mail: [david-dowling@uiowa.edu](mailto:david-dowling@uiowa.edu). Web: <http://clas.uiowa.edu/sjmc/people/david-dowling>

**Travis Vogan**, School of Journalism & Mass Communication and Department of American Studies, University of Iowa, USA. E-mail: [travis-vogan@uiowa.edu](mailto:travis-vogan@uiowa.edu). Web: <http://clas.uiowa.edu/sjmc/people/travis-vogan>