Introduction

By Susan Greenberg and Julie Wheelwright

Literary journalism, summed up here as narrative writing that makes a truth claim about people, places and events, is a genre that has received growing attention – as a practice, and as a field of scholarship. For the latter, a turning point was the founding of the International Association of Literary Journalism Studies (IALJS) in 2006.

In the new journal that emerged from that process, the problem and the promise of literary journalism are defined anew. The challenge is that literary journalism 'creates unique problems for readers, critics, and scholars' (Sims, 2009: 12). As the American writer Tracy Kidder put it: 'Life as you encounter it as a journalist is a lot messier than you'd want it in a novel and evil isn't always explicable' (*12*).

The promise is that under its multi-disciplinary heading, this problem of very long vintage can be studied 'on its own distinctive terms' (*12*). These terms include an international scope and long historical horizon; attention to the insights of practitioners; an interest in the digital future; and – by staying on its side of the 'reality boundary' – a desire to speak to 'the nature of our phenomenal reality *in spite* of the fact that our interpretations are inevitably subjective and personal' (15)

Since then, many international conferences, books and journal articles later, scholarship in the field continues to mature. This special issue of *Journalism* aims to rise to these challenges, and do whatever it can to contribute to that debate and help move it forward. In doing so, it identifies ethics as an important lens through which to view the field. Walt Harrington, among others, has argued that while journalists claim the right to determine their own ethical relationships, this is more complicated for narrative journalists because 'it is impossible to go intimately into people's lives without having to wrestle with what should be revealed' (2007: 170). And yet the

interests of different parties in this constantly changing area 'are often in conflict and present the starkest moral dilemmas' (*170*).

In a period of difficulty and enormous change such as the present, in which confidence has weakened in media institutions as with other sources of authority, an exploration of literary journalism's ethical dimensions seems a promising place to start. If literary journalism has the potential 'to anchor storytelling to a contingent world in a way that is more persuasive and trustworthy' (Greenberg, 2011: 169), a larger public discussion might be beneficial in considering common challenges. But as literary journalists we have only begun to think through the issues.

Ethics, deriving from the Greek *éthikos* or ethos (custom), is commonly understood to refer to the rules of conduct that people live by; a form of social consensus about how to judge what is 'right'. In the Oxford English Dictionary, it is defined as '[t]he science of morals; the department of study concerned with the principles of human duty' (OED, 1989). What are the rules and principles that ought to govern the moral conduct of literary journalists?

For writing and editing in general, the rules of conduct focus on speech acts – what is on the page – as well as the behaviour that occurs throughout the process of making the text. For literary journalism in particular, ethical issues can be understood on three levels. The first, relevant to all writing that makes a truth claim, concerns epistemology; how do we 'know' something, what tests of verification, falsification and experience do we set? The second, relevant to all journalism, concerns the additional consequences that can result from the reporting of events to a wider public; the magnitude of those events and of the reporting act itself.

The third, of special relevance to literary journalism, is about the difficulties that arise when making an explicit attempt to balance art and life (aesthetics and ethics;

beauty and truth). The distinction to be made here between literary journalism and other forms of written art 'lies not in the choice of narrative techniques, which belong to all forms of prose, but in the pact being made with the reader; the promise that one is not intending to deceive' (Greenberg, 2011: 169). This calls for demanding standards of transparency about the nature of the pact, and the manner in which the balance is drawn.

Literary journalism is also distinguished by the use of immersive techniques, which raise questions about the pact made not only with the reader, but also with the author's subjects. When an individual writer violates either type of contract, it's often the genre as a whole that comes under public scrutiny.

This special issue considers all three ethical dimensions of literary journalism, keeping in mind the distinctive terms articulated above. Within these pages, scholars offer theoretical perspectives on ethical debates that arise from contemporary practice:

Susan Greenberg kicks off the discussion about the principles of artistic writing by returning to Aristotle's *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*. When Aristotle defended poetry against its critics in ancient Greece he claimed three things; freedom to depart from standard speech; a licence to invent where necessary; and the right to be judged by a different standard than the material sciences. On the other hand, he also argued that the best stories were complex and persuasive, and he kept individual responsibility centre stage. Since then, other thinkers have reflected on this legacy and taken it in new directions, in an attempt to define an open, non-totalizing approach to practice. Greenberg sketches out the implications of his ideas and the potential for further

exploration of this rich territory. Consideration of these elements is not new in itself but the contribution here aims to connect them together in a new way, linking them specifically to narrative nonfiction.

The detailed way in which technique is applied is a central concern in the contribution by **Philip Mitchell**. Looking at the writing of Spanish journalist Javier Cercas, he uses discourse analysis to identify core ethical ideals that literary journalists share within representational processes. In particular, he describes how practitioners assume responsibilities towards the source of the original speech text and towards the reader, the addressee of the journalistic text. This involves considerations of *fairness* in handling confidential sources and *faithfulness* in giving a precise and detailed treatment of speech events, with the emphasis on achieving a balance between responsibilities rather than letting one taking precedent over another.

Fairness and faithfulness help to meet the demand for transparency. But a high level of disclosure about methodology and practice, going beyond the simple acknowledgment of individual subjectivity, may make for uncomfortable reading. When writers like Cercas are open about the complexity and messiness of the research process, readers must take greater responsibility for their individual interpretation of the text.

Journalists may have their own techniques but the question arises: do they have their own methods, or are these borrowed from other practices? Parallels are sometimes drawn, for example, between literary journalism and oral history, which both rely on in-depth interviewing. But because of the balance journalism must strike between the needs of subject and reader, perhaps it has its own unique insights to offer. **Richard**

Keeble uses the writings of critic Kenneth Tynan as an example of how a literary journalist might be positive about his subjects without resorting to sycophancy. The profile is often the home of hagiography and thinly disguised infotainment, but Tynan manages to achieve a delicate balance without shying away from difficult or challenging subjects. This suggests that the careful use of style – in this case, good-humoured enthusiasm – might be one way of resolving such professional dilemmas. Keeble also helps to map new ground by applying the concept of 'performance' not just to the interviewee, as is common in the social sciences, but to the interviewer as well – in the encounter itself and through his or her writerly 'persona' on the page.

Literary journalists share with historians a complex relationship to both printed and oral sources, and the way they are disclosed to readers. **Julie Wheelwright**'s examination of intelligence history explores the particular difficulties of evaluating sources that are inherently compromised. In an account of the making of a television documentary about a female KGB agent, she identifies the importance of myth in forming perceptions about the intelligence services in general, and female agents in particular. This underlines the need for literary journalists to remain sensitive to the nuances of the social and historical context in which documents are constructed, and points to another way of disclosing the limits of sources to readers.

Also writing within a historical context, **Kathy Roberts Forde** considers the role literary journalism can play in struggles for justice and freedom in democratic societies. In her articulation of Jeffrey Alexander's groundbreaking work on the nature of civil society and the critical concept of the civil sphere, she identifies the ways in which such forms of narrative nonfiction can offer a particularly influential

form of communication. Forde investigates, through James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, how they can operate as a highly influential 'symbolic communication' participating in a process of civil rupture and civil repair.

John Pauly considers the New Journalism of the 1960s as a particularly apt way of illustrating 'an institutionally situated approach to the history of literary journalism' which allows us to view familiar debates through a new lens. Using the rich sources available from the period, Pauly seeks to 'sharpen and qualify the familiar claim that the New Journalism was an expression of its times'. He does this by focusing on the organizational practices connecting American writers with their editors and the publications that found a market for their work. The conclusion is that the meaning of the New Journalism emerges only out of the close study of the institutional relationships that gave it life.

The need for literary journalists to be open about their subjectivity and their politic position helps to ensure that the 'social contract' has been respected. **Gillian Rennie**'s article illustrates this point with an example of the form's impact on the civil sphere within South Africa's evolving democracy. Using the case of Jonny Steinberg and his writing on prison gangs, she suggests that narrative journalistic techniques may have helped one section of South Africans to empathise with oppressed groups that, until the end of apartheid, were excluded from civil society. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's public confessions, within this context, have worked towards healing national wounds and to making the South African readers and listeners more receptive to new journalistic forms. Like the writings of Cercas, Rennie identifies the potential in Steinberg's work to move the reader from a position of passivity to one of active

involvement by questioning his own perspective and methods. In both cases, the readers are invited to make up their own minds about the evidence.

A key aspect of journalistic ethics is the management of readers' expectations. Just as the profile writer may struggle to maintain a critical distance in giving an honest, albeit subjective, view of the subject, so the confessional columnist wrestles with stylistic conventions about what is appropriate to disclose. **Ros Coward** explores the ethical dimensions of confessional journalists who write accounts of their illnesses and even death. She argues that these should be seen as highly constructed narratives. Rather than offering a raw truth, confessional writers conform to familiar narrative tropes while often failing to manage their reader's expectations, especially when writing about terminal illness. Even though the appearance of such work suggests a new openness about discussing devastating illnesses in public, the linguistic and stylistic choices for writers in this form are still limited.

John Tulloch returns to the handling of ethics through detailed questions of style. In this case, the focus is on the importance of point of view in creating trust between the writer and reader. The first person point of view was dismissed by Tom Wolfe as limiting, repetitive and egoistic, as if the journalist has failed to bring the reader inside the mind of any other character but his or her own. But a close look at the work of British writers Ian Jack and Gitta Sereny indicates that this stance ignores its immense advantages: flexibility, directness, immediacy and an intimacy that invites the reader to identify with the writer. Tulloch concludes that the foundation of trust in journalism lies not in the objective truth of its observations, but the truthfulness of its practice.

Even when literary journalists acknowledge their subjectivity through stylistic interventions, their readers still take for granted their ability to represent reality truthfully. How then to challenge this without creating negative repercussions for journalistic truth claims as a whole? **Marcel Broersma** and **Frank Harbers** explore this problem by comparing the 'personal engaged subjectivity' of foreign correspondent Robert Fisk and the 'personal-ironic subjectivity' of Dutch novelist-journalist Aaron Grunberg, raising questions about what constitutes an authentic narrative voice.

The relationship between the writer, reader and subject, a subject of concern for all the contributors to this issue of *Journalism*, is in essence an ethical one. It is for this reason that we aim to maintain our contract with the reader to avoid deliberate manipulation of the truth and deliver an account of reality in a recognisable context, to the best of our ability. Here, the role of the narrator is central in shaping not just the content of the writing but how it is delivered; and therefore, how readers engage with the subject and author.

In the contemporary landscape of literary journalism, the enticing possibility exists of moving beyond familiar debates about genre and subjectivity and defining a new paradigm that offers not a binary choice between ethics and aesthetics, but a fresh way of thinking that keeps both in balance. We hope that this will provide food for thought in future discussions.

One of the voices who will be missed from the conversation is that of Professor John Tulloch. John sadly passed away on 4 October, only days after submitting the final

draft of the article appearing here. John was founder and, until recently, head of the journalism programme at Lincoln University, and co-directed the university's Centre for Research in Journalism. Before that he was head of the department of journalism and mass communication at the University of Westminster. He was an executive member of the Institute of Communication Ethics and sat on boards of several academic journals. His publications include *Global Literary Journalism: Exploring the Literary Journalistic Imagination* (2012), co-edited with Richard Keeble, and *Tabloid Tales* (1999), edited with Colin Sparks.

John brought his original and enquiring mind to the study of literary journalism and made a major contribution to its development in the UK. He was also a wonderfully kind and generous colleague. His departure brings great sadness but his memory will be cherished.

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