

Why words must make pictures

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As the launch editor of Elle in the UK, and founder of a successful publishing company, GPS, Peter Jackson has an unrivalled reputation as an innovative magazine editor and publisher. He has shared these experiences for many years with journalism students and in this invited essay, he explains why, in his view, the ability to paint pictures with words is more important than ever in the digital age.

Journalism has never been more vibrant. Set free from the limitation of mere words on paper, the multimedia journalist is a packager of video, audio, photographs, graphics and archive film. The screen may be static but within it people, situations and locations are brought to life before the eyes of the countless million inhabitants of the digital world.

Yet the key element of a story is still words. Website reportage may project a staccato rhythm of urgency but there is no reason why a well-crafted feature cannot be read and enjoyed on screen. If readers will cheerfully engage with a 100,000-word novel from the bald face of an electronic tablet they can surely absorb 2,500 words of compulsive copy.

And there is still a vast market for words on paper – the longer-read features of journals of analysis and opinion, of weekend newspapers and their many supplements and of magazines of every sort. There is still a bright career for journalists who can capture facts with mood and atmosphere, turn a memorable phrase, coin an evocative headline.

But the big difference in the digital age is that if words being assembled at any length (on page or screen) are to grip and retain their reader they must make special effort to break free from the impression of serried ranks of solid type and to seek to match the vitality of the new dimensions.

If seeing is supposedly believing, we now inhabit a world of utter belief because everything is made visible to us.

Telephones which once merely carried voices along wires now enable us to look upon the caller. Where radio was sounds coming through a loudspeaker we can now peer into the studio by way of a webcam. The gramophone record, which progressed to the LP that became the CD that has become the DVD means we can watch the artistes perform. Television's zoom lens takes the couch-bound rugby fan into the heart of a scrum 10,000 miles away. The Hawkeye device enables the cricket follower to look through the body of the batsman and see if the ball would have hit the stumps. Medical scanners can portray every part of our physique and enable us to witness the very beginnings of human life within the womb. And man has ventured into space to beam back pictures of Mother Earth – that blue/grey orb floating in the darkness of eternity that poets have spent centuries trying to describe in imagination.

All of which means that journalists of the digital age must also turn their words into pictures

Of course, great writers have always done so. Why are we almost invariably disappointed by the film of a favourite novel? Because the author's graphic story-telling had so caught our imagination we had already filmed the book mentally, cast the characters, inhabited their space, recorded the soundtrack. And suddenly it's become our film, no-one else's.

Caitlin Moran, prolific columnist for The Times and a best-selling author, likens the role of the writer as supplying images to what she terms the "projection screen" within the reader's mind.

Addressing the reader, she writes: "If I type 'dragon' – casually, just six letters, no effort for me – suddenly, a dragon appears in your mind. You have to make it. Your brain fires up – perhaps your heartbeat will speed a little, depending on if you have had previous unhappy experiences with dragons. Perhaps you will have given her golden claws – or maybe you have a fondness for tight, black shiny scales. But however closely I have described her, she will still be your dragon – in your head. ... And no one else will ever see her" (Moran, 2016)

But dragons also roar and prowl across medieval landscapes. So the wordsmith must seek to produce walking/talking pictures against a colourful backcloth.

The digital journalist preparing to shoot a video interview quickly appreciates the added impact of location – how the setting adds significance to the words being delivered into camera. So a written interview must now be more than a record of what was said across a coffee table.

Hollywood PRs notoriously lock celebrities and interviewers in anonymous hotel rooms but in the wider world the writer's choice of location can create an extra dimension.

Where better to interview an offshore fisherman than on his boat? If not at sea then at the quayside when unloading his latest catch – his words punctuated by the shrieks of hovering seagulls and the trundling of rusty winches, the brine still fresh upon his beard, his clothes still carrying the stale stench of long-departed fish.

Where better to interview an old boxer than in the gymnasium he now runs? Fading posters of him in his prime, the contrast between his battered features and the shining eyes of his young hopefuls, the persistent rhythm of thuds against punchbags, the smell of sweat and embrocation.

The availability of archive film gives a website the powerful sense of action, of being there; the equivalent in words is the anecdote – the golden nuggets of feature writing that summon up and bring to life happenings, situations and traits of behaviour.

In its heyday, Reader's Digest used to instruct its writers: "State it – Prove it."

If a rock musician is described as bad tempered, give examples of him hurling a microphone from the stage or trashing a hotel suite. If a racing driver admits to being accident-prone, reconstruct his most miraculous escape. If a playboy is known as a reckless gambler, recreate the scene of the night in the casino he made his greatest loss.

Long before the worldwide web, Gay Talese, generally acclaimed as one of America's greatest magazine journalists, was already urging the case for feature writing to be regarded as an exercise in non-fiction rather than reportage at greater length, for words to breathe colour into the recounting of facts.

In his legendary essay on an elusive Frank Sinatra for Esquire back in 1966 ("Frank Sinatra Has a Cold") he wrote: "When Frank Sinatra drives to the studio he seems to dance out of the car across the sidewalk into the front door; then, snapping his fingers, he is standing in front of the orchestra in an intimate, airtight room, and soon he is dominating every man, every instrument, every soundwave."

Fifty words able to transport every reader into that studio.

More prosaically, Georgina Dawson lives at 23 Laburnum Ave, Ealing – that is a fact.

Georgina Dawson's suburban home is a flaking pebble-dashed bungalow with its front lawn long given over to a celebration of crazy-paving – that is a picture.

Talese's message could not be more relevant today when words have to challenge the imagination if they are to compete in this highly visual electronic world, when they have to illuminate and not merely inform.

Journalists have always been story-tellers. Now they have to think in terms of creating a storyboard which will fully engage that projection screen in the reader's mind.

References

Moran, C., *Moranifesto*, 2016, London: Random House