Literary Journalism as an Academic Discipline: Weighing the Pros and Cons

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Resumo: As a professional practice, literary journalism is more than a century old. As a subject to be studied and taught at the post-secondary level, the topic has a history dating back to the mid-20th century. However, an unresolved question remains: When will literary journalism finally emerge as a full-blown discipline? Tracing briefly the development of English and Journalism from monodisciplines to interdisciplinary branches of studies, the article inquires as to whether literary journalism would be better served as a future discipline or maintain its current status as a branch of journalistic study. What are the benefits and drawbacks to one over the other? And if disciplinary status is finally preferred, what stages are involved in its achievement?

Key words: Literary Journalism; disciplines versus studies; literary journalism studies.

1. Introduction

The introduction to Literary Journalism across the Globe concluded with an open challenge to literary journalism scholars around the world: “… [to] stop referring to
literary journalism as a genre … or even as a form … and [to] start calling it what it is: a discipline” (BAK and REYNOLDS, 2011, 18). Response to that challenge has been overwhelming, evidenced by the many monographs, collections and scholarly articles that have since been published in various languages worldwide. And yet, efforts in establishing literary journalism studies as an independent discipline (that is, an internationally recognized field of study with institutional backing and support from university administrators to publishing houses, from individual scholars to learned societies, and from commercial enterprises to governmental agencies) have been slow in developing, and the reasons for this are several.

To begin with, it should be noted that literary journalism studies has advanced along many fronts toward achieving disciplinary status, thanks in large part to media historians around the world who have determined its pedigree and established its moments of institutional crises: Norman Sims (2007) and John C. Hartsock (2000) in the U.S.; Edvaldo Pereira Lima (1993), Felipe Pena (2016) and Monica Martinez (2016) in Brazil; Sonja Merljak Zdovc (2008) in Slovenia; Myriam Boucharenc (2001) and Marie-Eve Thérenty (2007) in France; Isabelle Meuret and Paul Aron (2012) in Belgium; Albert Chillón (1999) in Spain; Charles A. Laughlin (2002) in China, Isabel Soares in Portugal (2011), to name but a few. These historians have established the main periods of literary journalism’s development over the centuries, which scholars have since been fleshing out in their criticism. But that scholarship has been largely influenced by the canon and techniques first espoused by Tom Wolfe in his 1973 manifesto, The New Journalism. A discipline, of course, needs its corpus of primary and secondary texts, and scholarship over the past couple decades has significantly increased the number and visibility of literary journalistic texts around the world. And yet, to move beyond corpus building and discourse analysis, the discipline of literary journalism will also need its own theories.

For example, due to literary journalism’s fact-driven novel-like aesthetics, its reading experience differs significantly from that of traditional journalism and literature, and yet we are repeatedly borrowing theories from both of these disciplines to explain liter-
ary journalism’s reader/text experience. Literary journalism studies would surely benefit from new theories on how a reader of a *New Yorker* article, who knows that the story is factual but who nonetheless takes pleasure in the reading the text as if it were a short story, processes information differently from those readings a piece in *Folha de S.Paulo* or a historical novel. While some theoretical inquiry into literary journalism aesthetics has been undertaken (HARTSOCK, 2015; LIMA, 1993; BORGES, 2013; AARE, 2016), and *ad hoc* research methodologies have frequently been imported from other disciplines (e.g., framing theory and life history from journalism/communication or deconstructionism and postcolonialism from literature/Cultural Studies), literary journalism studies is faced with the growing challenge to formulate its own theories and research methods, which would allow it to declare its autonomy and to lend its epistemological resources to other disciplines that are faced with resolving similar quandaries surrounding textual hybridity and historical subjectivity.

Also lacking are epistemologies and methodologies specifically linked to literary journalism’s disciplinarity. The theorization of literary journalism’s aesthetics (text-, author-, reader- and environment-based theories); a bibliographic assessment of the current state of research in international literary journalism studies (including a section on future research topics); an examination of other disciplinary theories and methods being imported into literary journalism’s analytical framework; the application of inter-, pluri- and transdisciplinarity to literary journalism studies around the world (that is, scholarship of literary journalism studies will likely come from other disciplines, such as history, sociology, media studies, communication studies, etc., thus it might be considered an emerging post-academic science); the exploration of literary journalism’s theories and methodologies that could be taken up by other disciplines… Each of these inquiries would not only inform us about the changes that have taken place within literary journalism studies over the years, but also help to map out the discipline’s future within the academy.

In sum, literary journalism studies has come a long way and in a relatively short timeframe, globally speaking, but much work remains to be done. The question, though,
is how? As a scientific field locally defined, which implies that Brazilian literary journalism studies would differ widely from French or American literary journalism studies? Or as a professional discipline universally acknowledged, which requires a common application of theories and methodologies that serve to coalesce the work currently being conducted in countries around the world? This talk’s argument is that, just as the praxis of literary journalism has carved out its niche in the world of journalism, the study of literary journalism will need to branch out and explore new frontiers within the academy. Like any adolescent whose passage into adulthood inevitably draws upon and, at times, contests the experiences and knowledge of its parents, literary journalism studies will need to weigh the theories and methodologies of its parent disciplines – literature and journalism – against its own epistemological wants and needs and, in so doing, establish a means to addressing the many questions and quandaries that preoccupy it, as much today as tomorrow. While such critical thinking may elicit contrastive responses from both sides of the literary journalistic spectrum, this talk welcomes that debate, grounded as it is in the belief that nothing new can emerge without a dialectic. After all, literary and journalistic studies are not haunted by their many, at times antagonistic, schools of critical thought. On the contrary, both have been made richer by them.

Stated in more general terms, this talk examines how and why a scientific paradigm obtains disciplinary status, and discusses what is lost or gained in the process. In applying these findings specifically to the question of literary journalism’s becoming a discipline or remaining a branch of journalistic (and at times literary) studies, it weighs the potential risks and benefits involved, and outlines what scholars can do today to help literary journalism studies achieve disciplinary status or, conversely, prevent it.

2. Discipline vs. Studies

Literature and journalism are universally recognized as academic disciplines that grant degrees of higher education and underpin later professional and academic careers. Though firmly entrenched within Western education, both disciplines, by today’s standards, are relatively young. To be sure, the professional practice of both literature and
journalism date back centuries, but their status as disciplines to be learned and defended at university level only began at the end of the 19th century and in the early decades of 20th centuries, respectively. A quick look at the histories of both disciplines (for literature, I will focus on the discipline of English) will help us understand the trajectory that literary journalism studies is current taking as it moves toward disciplinary status.

An academic discipline signifies an institutionally-recognized and sanctioned pillar of scientific inquiry that addresses and resolves problems deemed important by society, advances research pertaining to that field (and its many branches) and forms future scholars who will continue this bilateral research/pedagogy paradigm. In other words, it is about forming disciples, akin to a couple reproducing children who will share not only their unique DNA and but also their specific ideals, values and traditions.

A recent alternative to the academic discipline is a field of research termed “Studies,” which signifies inter-, trans- or pluridisciplinary modes of academic research that gain widespread recognition within the university model and thus create, like a sitcom spin-off, an additional, albeit smaller, disciplinary branch (or branches) of the scientific tree. Studies evolve either from the organic modification of a discipline’s DNA over time (socio-cultural, political, technological advances, etc., such as Gender Studies) or from the intentional grafting of one subdiscipline onto another (such as Sound Studies, a combination of Film Studies and Sound Engineering, with Film Studies having already emerged from Cultural Studies’ break with the disciplines of Literature and History). Here, an appropriate metaphor would be a couple who adopt a child or children, or who acquire one or more from a previous relationship, and attempt to integrate the various pre-existing ideals, values and traditions into their newly reconstituted family. In other words, disciplines create disciples, studies engender polyvocality.

If we consider the history of the discipline of English, what becomes apparent is that it was long rejected as inferior to the disciplines that arose from medieval education: medicine, law, theology. One only needs to read Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* to understand the hierarchies between the pilgrims who had disciplinary education versus those
trained in guilds. These early professional paradigms underwent significant changes during Enlightenment, when colonial confrontation with and conquest of the Other gave rise to natural scientific disciplines and philosophy. The need to understand this new, expanded world required totalizing information that lay outside of the traditional boundaries of medieval learning. Education was expanded into the universitas (or “whole”), the trivium (logic, grammar, rhetoric) and the quarvirium (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, music). The model of Renaissance leaning followed Diderot’s example with his L’Encyclopédie (1751–80), and the first Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degrees were being awarded in Germany around this time According to Keith Allan Noble (1994), while the first doctoral degree was awarded in medieval Paris around 1150, the doctorate of philosophy developed in Germany during the 17th century (NOBLE, 1994, 20).

Despite the introduction of new, philosophical disciplines into the university, hierarchies among various disciplines were still being maintained. Immanuel Kant’s The Conflict of the Faculties (1798), for example, separated the higher faculty (theology, law, medicine), which used authoritative content (Bible, legal treatise, medical research) from the lower faculty (philosophy) which relies on scholarly reason alone as its authority (KANT, [1798] 2001, 255–58). This became the prototype for all modern European and North American universities, and disciplines in the Humanities, or “soft” sciences, are still struggling today to earn their respect alongside the physical or “hard” sciences.

During the 19th-century, though, universities saw a rise in social scientific disciplines, partly due to the need to coalesce British identity (and race) among the peoples of its numerous colonies. English literature was seen as one way in which to make someone English, and it was first introduced into the University College London in 1828 as a field of study with exams leading to a degree. Henry Morley (1822-1894?) later became the first Professor of English Literature at University College London in 1865, the year given to the birth of English as a discipline. He is considered to be the first academic (in England) to devote an entire career to English Studies, publishing his monumental English Writers: An Attempt Towards a History of English Literature in 11
volumes from 1864-1894. The University of Oxford would soon follow in 1885, inviting applications for the newly created Merton Professorship of English Language and Literature, whose candidates included the Shakespearean scholar A. C. Bradley. Oxford converted the Merton Professorship into a Chair of English Literature in 1904, and Cambridge followed suit in 1911 with its Literature Chair.

A similar history exists with the rise of Journalism Studies in the academy, albeit several years later. As the emerging discipline of English was to Law or Medicine, so was that of Journalism to English. Long is the history, in fact, of literature’s supposed superiority to journalistic writing, where many an author aspired to the former but had to stoop to the latter. During the second half of the 19th century, writers throughout Europe and the United States dabbled in both genres, often times seeing little difference between them, as media scholars have repeatedly noticed (BOUCHARNEC, 2004; THÉRANTY, 2007). It would take the crisis of the jingoistic reporting and government sponsored news censorship during WWI, however, that would mark the emergence of journalism as an academic discipline (KNIGHTLY, 1975). In France alone, specific Grandes Écoles du Journalisme developed to train and educate journalists would only open in the 1920s. The factographic model of “hard” and “objective” news reporting used in the curricula would eventual replace the sensationalist “yellow” journalism just prior to the war.

While Disciplinary education still maintains control over the academic curricula, interdisciplinary Studies have gained considerable ground since the 1960s: Women’s Studies at Cornell in 1969 in the U.S.; Cultural Studies in Birmingham in 1968 in the U.K., etc. Today, Studies have become so important that specific Institutes and degree-offering programs are rivaling the more traditional disciplines in terms of university enrollment, since job placement is requiring skills beyond those traditionally taught within the disciplines. Interdisciplinarity, and it several avatars, is, for better or worse, the current buzz word among academic communities and grant-funding agencies, and isolated disciplines are being asked/strongly requested/forced even to begin open their borders to other disciplines.
The rise of specific disciplines like English and, later, Journalism, was not always met favorably. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), in his essay “We Scholars” (1886), attacks the professionalism of unidisciplinary academic study: “The Declaration of Independence of the man of science, his emancipation from philosophy, is one of the more subtle after-effects of the democratic form and formlessness of life: self-glorification and presumption of the scholar now stands everywhere in full bloom and its in finest springtime” (NIETZSCHE, [1886] 2002, 93).

Contemporary dissent to disciplines began rising around mid-20th century. In “Intellectual Issues in the History of Artificial Intelligence,” Allen Newell writes, “The disciplinary structure of science is a crazy quilt. Disciplines emerge and extend, shrink and disappear, merge and fracture, overlap and surround” (NEWELL, 1983, 188). And Tony Becher adds in Academic Tribes and Territories: Intellectual Enquiry and the Cultures of Disciplines: Men [and women] of the sociological tribe rarely visit the land of the physicist and have little idea what they do over there. If the sociologist were to step into the building occupied by the English Department, they would encounter the cold stares if not the slingshots of the hostile natives …. the disciplines exist as separate estates, with distinct subcultures (BECHER, 1989, 23).

Concerning the demise of disciplinary studies, Joe Moran writes in Interdisciplinarity: “this development was not simply an organic consequence of advances in knowledge, but also the product of institutional and societal factors, particularly the demand for specialists in a complex and technologically sophisticated society” (MORAN, 2002, 13). But not everyone is in favor of the shift from discipline in studies, as Kaarle Nordenstreng writes in his essay, “Discipline or Field? Soul-searching in Communication Research”: “But I have mixed feelings about this success story [of Communication Studies]. My second thought – more and more even the first one – is that the field, with all the expansion and diversity, runs the risk of becoming professionally self-centred and scientifically shallow” (NORDENSTRENG, 2007, 219).
With university curricula gradually moving away from the disciplinary pillars, which are still holding strong despite the attack, the question remains: Do we want to literary journalism to become a discipline? If so, who decides and how? As history tells us, it is not our decision to make. Society and the transformations in geopolitics will make that decision for us, and it will no doubt take shape in the century to come. But we can lay the groundwork now, if we desire to, and perhaps to a certain extent we are doing that now.

3. What are the Benefits / Drawbacks to Disciplinary Status?

As with most discipline, the answer to the question of benefits is universal: money. Money is needed for financing research, paying professors’ salaries, writing and selling books (textbooks), and securing tenure for teachers. Insuring the longevity of literary journalism as a discipline would create jobs for literary journalists (by securing a global reading public), create jobs for professors and instructors. In short, it would provide a trunk that will produce its own branches.

As to the drawbacks, there are several, and simply considering the rise of the disciplines of English and Journalism discussed above show us the potential pitfalls that await us. Disciplines become monolithic and thus potentially conservative and hostile to change, relying too often on past achievements instead of forging new paths. They tend to recycle older or borrowed theories and maintain traditional canons that identify them from other disciplines – shoring up the borders as such from potential coups, such as we saw in English studies with the rise of postmodernism and multiculturalism in the 1980s. Although it is not up to us to decide if literary journalism becomes a discipline or nor, as noted above, we can still have a hand in laying the groundwork to disciplinary structure, should we so desire. As such, here are some basic stages that could be undertaken to set the process in motion (and since some of these stages have already been done, it suggests that that ball is already rolling).
4. What are the Stages to Achieving Disciplinary Status?

There are any number of stages, each with several substages, needed to achieving disciplinary status, but I offer below four basic steps, based on those we found in the shaping of English as a discipline in the Humanities.

**Phase 1. Establish a community of like-minded scholars.** Establish a synergy of scholars around the world already working within a similar field of study by founding an academic association, a mouthpiece in which to disseminate new knowledge (journal, newsletter, website) and a core corpus of works on which to build the foundation and eventual history of the emerging discipline.

**Phase 2. Create Endowed Chairs** for the study of literary journalism around which Institutes can form and eventually grow into Studies units, attracting students and eventually producing PhDs, whose growing numbers will establish the need for a separate academic department and diploma. Continue building a corpus and constructing theories and methodologies unique to the newly-forming discipline’s needs. Currently examples of this include University of California Irvine’s “Literary Journalism” or New York University’s “Literary Reportage” graduate program.
Phase 3. Create a market for the study of Literary Journalism that will feed a global readership and vice versa. Write and publish books and articles to promote Literary Journalism Studies, which will, in turn, foster new and competing university programs and academic mouthpieces, such as multiple journals dedicated specifically to literary journalism scholarship. Establishing more venues to publish research will create the need for more departments and thus more academic jobs and posts. More satellite conferences (ESSE, AEJMC, MLA, ACLA, SBPJOR…) will reach out to/find new people, thus increasing the discipline’s base across the world.

Phase 4. Establish academic diplomas from BAs to PhDs specifically for the study of literary journalism. With increased research, and the venues to publish it, a medium through which to sell it (book stores, academic presses), university departments looking to harness the movement and give it the house that it needs will come an increase in students seeking out programs of literary journalism, either to produce it, or to study it, or to attempt both. Take, for example, the Di-
plomado en Escritura Narrativa de No Ficción at the Universidad Alberto Hurtado in Chile.

5. Some Suggestions for the Future of Literary Journalism Studies

A few conclusions can be drawn from this discussion. First, there are obviously both advantages and disadvantages to achieving disciplinary status for literary journalism studies (perhaps disciplines are the past and studies the future?). Second, a bottom-up, not top-down, approach is necessary for achieving either disciplinary or studies status for literary journalism (Chairs before Departments). It will take perhaps a century to complete this cycle (unless academics progress at the same speed as technology). Third, we cannot ultimately decide literary journalism’s fate, either as a genre or as an academic discipline, but we can begin laying the foundation, which I think we have and continue to do.

As we progress toward building the discipline of literary journalism studies, bearing in mind the benefits and drawbacks to that status, there are a few things we can do to better prepare the groundwork and evolution of the field. Epistemologies, methodologies and praxes of literary journalism studies that are linked directly to the greater debate of disciplinary identity include: the theorization of literary journalism’s aesthetics (text-, author-, reader- and environment-based theories); a bibliographic assessment of the current state of research in international literary journalism studies (in including a section on future research topics); an examination of other disciplinary theories and methods being imported into literary journalism’s analytical framework; the application
of inter-, pluri- and transdisciplinarity to literary journalism studies around the world (that is, scholarship of literary journalism studies will likely come from other disciplines, such as history, sociology, media studies, communication studies, etc., thus it might be considered an emerging post-academic science); the exploration of literary journalism’s theories and methodologies that could be taken up by other disciplines; etc.

Specific questions that seek answers include:

- Can literary journalism’s aesthetics, ethics and techniques be considered universal or must they necessarily change from one nation to the next? And if they do change per a given nation, is it due to social, cultural and/or technological advances? What are the advantages or disadvantages of one over the other?
- Is there a philosophy of literary journalism, given its humanist and often phenomenological approach?
- Is it possible to compare various other minority “studies” that have gained disciplinary status over the years (gender studies, race studies, postcolonial studies, etc.) with literary journalism studies in terms of promoting institutional and societal change?
- In which countries might literary journalism work or not as a discipline and why? Would this potential division hurt the discipline more or help it and, if so, how exactly?
- Is there a political system more adapted to literary journalism than other disciplines? If so, why?
- Who or what determines the “literariness” of a literary journalistic text? The text itself, the writer, the reader, or a combination of the three? Is there an additional factor not yet considered? And is the “literary” label an obstacle to overcome in classification or an advantage to embrace in the development of literary journalism as a discipline?
- What roles do students and educators of literary journalism have in moving it toward disciplinary status?
• What roles do administrations, commercial enterprises and independent agencies and journalists have in moving literary journalism along toward disciplinary status?
• How can literary journalism contribute to political and social change, and can these changes hinder or help establishing it as a discipline?
• How has literary journalism adapted to digital media and environments, and what effects will these have on its disciplinary status?

How we address these and the many other questions that still await us will play a significant role in determining the fate of literary journalism studies in universities around the world.

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