

US in-depth journalism rebirth defies Twitter age

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Noah Rosenberg works on his iPad at a coffee shop in New York on August 21. Rosenberg says his "Narratively" website, which he hopes to launch next month, will ignore breaking news for original, behind-the-scenes material that takes a long time to report and—at 5,000 words—a good while to read.

The Twitter age is killing in-depth journalism, while local newspapers are becoming extinct—right?

Then what is a talented young [New York Times](#) reporter doing founding a website devoted to in-depth local reporting?

News aggregators, 24/7 news cycles, 140-character [Tweets](#) and attention-span-challenged [web users](#) have transformed much of the US media into the journalistic equivalent of McDonalds: quickly produced, easily consumed.

Times freelancer Noah Rosenberg says his "Narratively" website, which he hopes to launch next month, will be more like a long-simmering stew.

"There's been a push against the 24/7 bubble, the echo chamber," Rosenberg said at a Brooklyn cafe that sometimes doubles as his start-up's office. "We're really slowing things down."

Narratively's stable of about 30 young New York journalism high-fliers will ignore breaking news for original, behind-the-scenes material that takes a long time to report and—at 5,000 words—a good while to read.

There'll be no breaking news, Rosenberg said, but stories "you can dust off in one year, two, three years down the road and they'll still have some meaning."

When the popular BuzzFeed homepage carries of slideshows like "Cutest Pictures Of Cats And Babies," Yahoo.com's "Trending Now" is mostly showbiz, and big media organizations chase in herds after the same news, Narratively's ambitions might seem quixotic.

But Rosenberg is part of a surprising revival in which sites like Atavist.com and Byliner.com, both founded last year, and Longform.org, founded in 2010, are finding new ways to turn high-quality, lengthy non-fiction into a business.

"We're really tapping into this energy out there," the 29-year-old said.

— Old-fashioned journalism done in new ways —

The collapse in [newspaper advertising](#) revenues has reduced the number of publications with resources to produce long-form journalism to a

small elite—the likes of the The New Yorker, The New York Times' magazine and a few others.

Where the new in-depth outlets are different is that they appear only online, meaning they never run out of space on the page and can more readily explore the possibilities of digital technology.

Paul Janensch, a journalism professor at Quinnipiac University, says that's good news, because the traditional US media has often allowed long-form journalism to become verbose and self-indulgent.

"I don't have the time for that and I wonder how many people will wade through it. It's very forbidding," he said.

"My hope is that with the Internet there'll be not just long form, but new ways of conveying a lot of complicated information."

Brooklyn-based Atavist sells online non-fiction articles that are longer than would appear in magazines, but shorter than books.

Atavist's own software then allows those stories to be told in multi-media format on iPads and other handheld devices.

Readers hear, as well as read the author, see maps, photos and video, creating an experience quite different to sitting down with a paper magazine.

Atavist co-founder Evan Ratliff says that embracing technological innovation is crucial.

"There are plenty of people who want to read things with depth, things with reporting, things with narratives," he said in a telephone interview. "The question is not 'are they reading,' but 'can you get to them?'"

Other sites, like Longform.org and Longreads.com, build a community of readers who share favorite long-form pieces, whether gleaned from other websites or their own original work.

Byliner.com is more ambitious, carrying long articles picked up from across the web, while also commissioning original works between 5,000 and 30,000 words sold through Amazon and Apple.

Rosenberg hopes to exploit the same model: original reporting, digital firepower, and bending over backwards to engage audiences.

Narratively aims to produce one themed package a week on life in New York. Death, sex, hustlers, and all the different ways that New Yorkers keep on the move will be among the first issues.

Unlike a traditional magazine investigation, each package will consist of extra-length text stories, but also short documentaries, animation, and photo essays. Each Friday there'll be an interactive session with readers, including Q&As and podcasts.

"We're taking local stories in a new direction and engaging new mediums, mash-ups if you will, to engage people in our story telling," Rosenberg said.

Can the new long-form journalism escape the financial burdens dooming in-depth and local reporting at traditional publications?

"We still think that's an open question," Atavist's Ratliff said.

The Atavist is well on the way to raising \$1.5 million in seed money from investors including Google's Eric Schmidt, so there's hope.

Narratively is at the precarious stage of waiting to get its first \$50,000

through a Kickstarter campaign. If that comes through, the site will have a chance to prove itself and seek sponsors.

On the plus side, outlets like Narratively have few overheads and can use the same high-quality freelance journalists already relied on by the cash-strapped traditional media.

Rosenberg would like, eventually, to be able to pay himself.

"I'm the publisher," he says, trying to describe his crucial role. But then he shakes his head, smiling: "That sounds so archaic!"

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