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## **JOURNALISM, PRACTICE AND...POETRY**

### **Or the unexpected effects of creative writing on journalism research**

*This article examines the role of creative writing in understanding journalism. It argues that non-academic writing—poetry in this case—can play a far more significant part in journalism research than that of an entertaining genre for disseminating a study's findings, mainly to audiences beyond academia. Not only, among other contributions, can poetry complement traditional "academic" texts by filling the gaps of the vivid details of the situated practices of journalism as they are lived in real life. It also has far-reaching epistemological and ontological implications: it raises, in other words, fundamental questions related to what we assume the world where journalists operate to be, the role of imagination, sensory perceptions and materiality in everyday manifestations of journalism, as well as the very place of the scholar in the research process. The benefits of creative writing are illustrated through examples of actual poems written while conducting a comparative study of foreign journalists in the UK, Norway and Somalia.*

*Keywords: creative writing; poetry; foreign correspondent; practice; Actor Network Theory (ANT)*

#### **A little experiment and a warning**

This piece is part of a broader agenda that aims to explain how the practice of journalism, as inextricable part of (an often transnational) social and political reality, is relationally constructed. This approach is based on Actor Network Theory's (ANT) understanding of the social fabric as an assemblage of associations between humans and objects (Latour 2005)—'humans' in this case being journalists, editors, sources, politicians, members of the public; 'objects' referring not only to technologies like mobile phones, cameras, buildings and transport systems but also ideas and meanings. ANT, in this respect, is useful in explaining the 'agency' of objects and materiality: their ability to 'make a difference' in the world of humans (Latour 2005: 71).

After having used this framework to explain the difference that physical space makes in the networks that underpin journalistic practices—identities, newsgathering routines and news outputs—of foreign correspondents in London and Oslo (Archetti 2014), with this article I am taking the approach further in three ways. First I am extending the existing comparative study by including references to the practices of foreign correspondents covering Somalia. Second I add an emotional and sensorial layer to the dimensions of practice previously explored. Such dimensions still fit within the ANT domain of investigation by being connected both to materiality and the construction of meaning by human beings who relate to objects and other humans. Sensorial perceptions are here seen as the outcome of a body interacting with the physical environment. They can be further broken down, depending on which level of detail we want to get to and which sense we are considering, into smaller processes. For example, in the case of hearing, the perception of a sound is the result of vibrations travelling through the middle ear bones into the inner ear (cochlea), where thousands of tiny hair cells convert them into electrical signals, which are then sent to the

brain through the hearing nerve; the information is at that point processed inside our brain through the firing of neurotransmitters between synapses (BBC 2014). Emotions, which might or might not be related to sensorial perceptions, instead, are the product of an individual mind's interaction with other people, places, objects, ideas and meanings (Feldman Barrett 2007 et al.). A third way in which I am taking further the application of ANT to journalism is by bringing the researcher to the fore: a consistent application of ANT as an ontological lens to understand social reality means, methodologically, recognizing the investigator—not only the participants in a study—as an actor-network. In this sense, as a researcher, not only my identity, but also my thinking in gathering, selecting and interpreting the data are the result of the accumulation of my previous personal and academic history. To show some of the thinking processes and experiences behind this article—map the actor-network of this piece—I will be alternating more traditional academic text sections to looser narrative parts and poems. In this sense this might be regarded, at least in Journalism Studies, as an experimental piece.<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction: The story so far**

The idea for this article first sprung in my mind, not yet fully formed, at some point in 2012. At the time, after having taken an evening course in Creative Writing at a local café in Headingley, where I lived in Leeds, I had started experimenting with poetry and short stories (Archetti 2013a). By that stage, partly out of personal interest, but mostly as a result of a steady influx of e-mails from the University of Salford about the need to develop REF-able “impact” case studies,<sup>2</sup> I had considered poetry as a tool to make academic research more accessible and engaging. I remember the first book I consulted about this, *Telling About Society* (2007) in which the author, Howard Becker, talks about the role of literature, drama and photography, among the rest, in providing social analysis. By 2013, I thought that the research project I was embarking on, a comparative study of foreign correspondence in the UK and Norway, could be accompanied—indeed complemented—by a creative writing piece, which could perhaps published, one day, on its side. Incidentally, the dream never materialized. That piece “Journalism and the City: Redefining the Spaces of Foreign Correspondence” was indeed published in this journal. However, between struggling with a growing workload and picking up the pieces—both physically and psychologically—of yet another administrative reorganization at my institution, I did not materially have the time to think through my argument about the role of creative writing in research. That is why I take the opportunity to include poems that were written about that study in this later article. Ideally poems 2, 3 and 4 in the pages to follow should be read together with that piece. But let' go back to 2013.

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<sup>1</sup> This style of writing is not new. Here I am particularly inspired by three works. The first is Bruno Latour's *Aramis: The Love of Technology* (1996), an academic novel—‘*scientifiction*’ as Latour calls it (p. ix)—which tells the story of a team made up of a professor and a young assistant attempting to solve the mystery of how the French *Aramis* transport system, despite its pioneering nature and the heavy state investment it received, got to be scrapped between the 1960s and 1980s. The second work is by Mona Livholts: in “The Loathsome, the Rough Type and the Monster: The Violence and Wounding of Media Texts on Rape” (2009) she examines the media representation of rape in a small town in the North of Sweden. Livholts did not just conduct a discourse analysis of the reports themselves, but included memory work and short stories to make explicit the way herself, as a researcher, was being affected by the material she was investigating. The third is a poem by Michael Bloor, “The Rhyme of the Globalised Mariner: In Six Parts (with Bonus Tracks from a Chorus of Greek Shippers)” (2012), published on the *Sociology* journal. The poem, through humour, vividly complements a traditional academic analysis of the political economy of the shipping industry.

<sup>2</sup> REF stands for Research Excellence Framework and is a UK-wide assessment of the quality of research in higher education institutions.

That year I started conversations and asked as many questions about creative writing as politely possible to any poet I came across.<sup>3</sup> I read a piece about reflective writing in conducting research in nursing (Jasper 2005) that appeared to have nothing to do with my fields of study, but which I found inspiring. I contacted Mona Livholts, founder of the reflexive Academic Writing network based at Midsweden University,<sup>4</sup> who kindly shared a sample of her works, a fascinating mixture of creative and academic writing (Livholts 2009; 2010; 2013).

Still without a clear idea as to what to do, I decided to go down the route—which perhaps resembled rather an art project and for some reason appeared to me safer—of taking the words of the interviewees and rearrange them to create poems. (I later discovered that this is called “found poetry” and that I am irrational). To my surprise, I realized that the exercise of writing poems was not only useful in recycling scraps of information—those little anecdotes and details that I found so fascinating but which would not have made it through the process of selecting quotes for an academic article and would have ended up buried in my computer’s hard drive. The very act of writing and asking myself why I had indeed selected a (supposedly) unimportant detail for a poem (or one unimportant detail over another unimportant detail), was also helpful to my analysis of the data. I will return to this later in the article, but for now: the poems gave me a first opportunity to reflect on the conversations—“make sense” of the information I had collected—more freely and creatively than through the lenses (as flexible as they were) of my initial hypotheses. Poetry, it clearly appeared to me, had methodological implications.

This was not all. The further reflection on the possibilities that poetry could open up in terms of vividly bringing to the reader the sensorial and material aspects of the journalists’ practices—images, sounds and even smells from the places where the correspondents worked and lived—dramatically highlighted the limitations of current approaches to journalistic practice. Of course, studies of journalistic practice come with the most diverse aims, but to what extent can one truly study practice<sup>5</sup> without engaging with the senses, emotions and materiality? Just like some of my interviewees attempt in their stories to make the readers *feel* what is like to be in Somalia to enable a deeper understanding of what is being reported, could I not attempt the same with my readers? Why are the domains of sense and emotions normally regarded as irrelevant by my field of study when they permeate every moment of daily life? It would be reasonable to expect that fear, when working in a high risk environment like Mogadishu, would have an impact on the newsgathering routines of a journalist. So would heat, the weight of a bullet-proof vest, and the fact that it is not possible to move across the Somali capital without crossing a myriad checkpoints and cement-filled Hesco barriers. A correspondent in Oslo—a town celebrated by most foreign journalists I talked to for its ‘easy’ access to sources, especially authorities—had mentioned to me the fact that access was not as straightforward when one is non-European. Skin colour, prejudice, perhaps negative feelings towards a foreigner’s accent made a difference, adding a sensorial and emotional layer to the networked geography of people-objects associations in my study. But at that time I had only categorized the content of my conversation in terms of “access”/“lack of access.”

The point of my comparative study of foreign journalists in the UK and Norway had initially been to explain the role of space in journalism. I had more directly engaged with the material aspects of practice—at least some of them—particularly the role of objects like communication technologies, buildings and transport systems in the everyday life of

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<sup>3</sup> I am particularly grateful to (in alphabetical order): Seamus Cashman, Debjani Chatterjee, Suzanne McArdle, and Scott Thurston.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.miun.se/en/research/major-research-initiatives/research-groups/r.a.w>

<sup>5</sup> Practices here are taken to be the ‘embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding’ (Schatzki 2001:2). They are ‘not just skills and activities but bodily experiences, surface presentations, and even physical structures as well’ (ibid.).

journalists, showing that the role of location in journalism transcends the merely physical and geographical dimensions. Perhaps this was a step in the direction of approaching practice more comprehensively, but how much was still missing? I am not arguing that one needs to incorporate all of everyday life in the study of practice. The purpose of scientific enquiry is “selecting” from reality what is relevant to answer a research question. Starting from the chaos of everyday life and ending again in it would be pointless. What matters here, though, is: What is in fact *relevant*? In the case of my study, what *was* journalism really? What was still missing in my approach to it *that would have made a difference to my knowledge of its practices*? This is how my nearly accidental experiment with creative writing also led me to question the study of journalism from a theoretical, indeed ontological, perspective.

This piece re-traces my journey of discovery, developing the argument that creative writing in journalism research is far more than an entertaining genre for disseminating a study’s findings to audiences beyond academia. It raises, in fact, fundamental questions related to what we assume the world where journalists operate to be, the nature of journalistic writing, the role of imagination, sensory perceptions and materiality in everyday practice, as well as the very place of the scholar in the research process.

The analysis develops in four steps. To start with it addresses the contributions that poetry can make to academic enquiry. It then moves on to explain how poetry is more relevant to journalism—not only to its study, but also to its daily manifestations—than one would realize. The third section illustrates the methodological benefits of creative writing through examples of poems written between 2013 and 2015. The conclusions close in onto the deeper contributions that creative writing can make to our understanding of journalism.

#### *Poem 1. The researcher as actor-network*

This poem was originally published (Archetti 2014b) in “Poems for Mamilla” (Cashman 2014). It followed my participation to a poetry festival (Mamilla International Poetry Festival, October 2013) in Ramallah where, the only academic among creative writers, I had the opportunity to informally discuss my initial ideas about academic-creative writing. The poem mixes the experiences of witnessing places connected to the Israel-Palestinian conflict with personal reflections about my role as a researcher in an increasingly commercialized and bureaucratized university environment.

#### **Foreigner**

I am a face,  
I am a name.  
I am a knot of feeling and experience,  
the smell of a lake,  
lust, pain and resilience.

I am the survivor  
who crumbles today,  
but will get up  
to fight next.

I am all the people I’ve met  
and all the places I’ve been,  
I am the eternal stranger  
who never fits entirely in.

I have died a dozen deaths,  
picked up my pieces,  
rearranged them every time

among the dust  
of hasty reconstructions.

Condemned to be the observer,  
never the judge.  
I am free to follow questions,  
but what is their price?

### **Creative writing for research purposes**

In the last fifteen years, across the social sciences, there has been a proliferation of creative writing applications to research. Examples of this trend, which has recently been referred to with the umbrella term of 'poetic enquiry' (Prendergast, Leggo and Sameshima 2009), can be located across a range of disciplines, from nursing and social work, to anthropology, geography and feminist studies, just to name a few (Prendergast 2009: xxi). Monica Prendergast, in compiling a detailed annotated bibliography of existing academic research incorporating elements of creative writing finds not only that "Poet's Corner" sections figure regularly on the pages of a range of peer-reviewed journals—for example *Social Work*, *American Anthropologist*, or the *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* (ibid. xx). She also identifies a sheer variety of terms and practices: among forty different labels she lists are 'data poetry,' 'field poetry,' 'research-generated poetry,' 'poetic analysis,' 'investigative poetry'....(ibid. xx-xxi).

This development, which is based on both acknowledging and exploiting for analytical purposes a researcher's engagement with the senses, feelings and the surrounding reality, also reflects a broader attention in the humanities at large towards materiality, practice and emotions. These aspects have become the subject of study and debate, respectively, in the so called "material turn" (Hicks 2010), "practice turn" (see, for example, Schatzki, Cetina and Savigny 2001) and the "emotional turn" (for instance, Davidson and Milligan 2007; Hutchison and Blaiker 2014). Ivan Brady (2004), an anthropologist whose poetry has been widely published in academic journals and books, talks about research complemented by the use of poetry as an 'artful science.' Paul Stoller, another well-known name within this investigative genre, writes of 'sensuous scholarship' (1997; 2004). Both authors refer to the opportunity offered by creative writing to account for the 'plurality of meaning that we experience' (Brady 2004: 632). They particularly emphasize that the need to overcome the Cartesian separation between mind and body that has been at the root of the development of modern science. Because human beings, and with them the researcher, are both sensual and intellectual creatures (Brady 2004: 624; Stoller 1997: xi-xv), academic enquiry alone is able neither to capture nor to convey the full complexity of reality. In this sense sensuous scholarship, as 'a mixing of head and heart' (Stoller 1007: xviii), is a more comprehensive research practice.

While different authors might coin their own term to refer to the integration of creative writing into research, Prendergast (2009: xxii) finds that most uses relate to two main purposes. The first is the use of poetry as a form of reflection—literally 're-search.' An example is *Incarceration Nation: Investigative Prison Poems of Hope and Terror* (Hartnett 2003), a collection of 33 poems based on the poet/author's experience of working in prison as a teacher. The poems become a magnifying glass on daily experience deployed, in the words of their author, to 'document the prison-industrial complex's massive production of brutality' (Hartnett in Gergen 2005). Another illustration is *The Book of Dead* (Rukeyser, 1938), a set of 20 poems about the Hawk's Nest incident, one of the worst industrial disaster in the US, in which as many as 700 miners died over the end of the 1920s of silicosis, a poisoning of the lungs, while building a hydroelectric plant in West Virginia (Lucas and Paxton n.d.). The 9,000+ words poetic text, on the basis of interviews with miners' family members, officials, company representatives and lawyers (snippets of conversation are used throughout), reconstructs the circumstances that led to neglecting the health of the workers, presents the points of views of the parties involved, as well as the human tragedy experienced by victims

and their relatives. A second category sees the use of poetic representations of data as well as contributions—reproduced with a greater or lesser degree of interpretation by the researchers—by participants to a study. Examples of this category might include the investigation of as diverse experiences as those of: physical education teachers (Sparkes et al. 2010), couples living with HIV (Cannon Poindexter 2002), working with African refugees in Sicily (Reale 2014), marriage and family (Richardson 1994), experiencing organizational change as a manager (Brearley 2000).

### **Poetry and journalism: Not an odd couple**

Poetry and journalism would seem, at first glance, at the opposite ends of the writing spectrum. Especially in the Anglo-Saxon world, journalism tends to be seen as being about objectivity, the facts, the detached observation, “bearing witness” to history. This is regarded as the quasi scientific enterprise of revealing truths which ‘stay the same no matter who speaks about them’ (Burt 2013: n.p.). Poetry, on the contrary, is most strongly associated to subjectivity, art, the uniquely personal and creative viewpoint of the writer, the sphere of emotions. Yet this tension between activities, professional missions and ways of writing that, one would think, are so clearly and diametrically opposite, is only illusory (Archetti 2013b).

To start with, over history, there have been plenty of examples of journalists who were also poets (Nelson 2007). We can think of poet and Nobel prize literary laureate Rudyard Kipling, who worked in his youth as editorial assistant of the *Civil and Military Gazette*, a newspaper in Lahore (Nelson 2007: 45-46) and later edited a paper, the *Friend*, for the British troops during the Boer War (ibid: 61-63). Archibald MacLeish, who received multiple awards including two Pulitzer Prizes for his poetry, also worked part-time for *Time*, the *Toronto Star* and *Fortune* (Nelson 2007: 166-168). Henry Luce, founder of both *Time* and *Fortune*, was in this respect convinced that it was ‘easier to turn poets into business journalists than to turn bookkeepers into writers’ (Nelson 2007: 170).

These stories are more than coincidences dictated by the need, as it has often been the case, of exploiting one’s writing skill to pay the bills or the fact that both poetry and journalism respond to events—think of war poetry about WWI (Roberts 1996) or writing inspired by 9/11 (Johnson and Merians 2011, for one example)—and, more broadly, to life. In fact, poetry and journalism share the same aim of engaging the reader and revealing that what is not immediately apparent. As Irish political journalist and writer Olivia O’Leary wrote (cited in Greenslade 2011) talking about the Northern Ireland conflict: ‘Journalism and poetry at their best try to state the truth. Journalism and poetry at their worst do the opposite [...] [at their best] they hold up a mirror in which we can safely see ourselves.’

There are several examples of projects where poetry has been used to contribute to journalism, particularly to invite the public to observe everyday life with different eyes. In 2009 Israel newspaper *Haaretz* replaced for a day its reporters with leading poets and writers (Guardian 2009). In 2012 American *NPR* invited poets to write the day’s news in verse (NPR 2012). In February 2014 the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the Centre for Investigative Reporting and the young residents of a public housing in San Francisco were brought together in “Off/Page,” a project designed to encourage the reporting of issues that would not normally make the news through innovative forms of storytelling (Off/Page 2014).

It can be argued, however, that all good journalism involves to some extent a poetic angle. Beyond merely informing the reader through the who, what, where and when of a news beat—which nowadays could be written even by a robot (Clerwall 2014)—good journalism is ultimately about enabling *understanding*. And this, in a world saturated with information, where our attention is dulled by both the amount of distractions and the impression of having heard it all before, needs to include the *how* and *what it feels like*. Stephen Burt (2013), a poet and Professor of English, talks about the way in which poetry is the practical response

to the challenge, for journalists, of reporting the same everyday events. He uses as an example the covering of basketball games:

How many synonyms are there for “wins” or “loses,” “defeats,” “pummels,” “vaults fast,” “surprises,” “dominates,” “sneaks by”? How many very short stories about momentum reversed, one turning-point steal, or block, can be rewritten before they all start to sound the same?

[...]

And that’s what the writer of a good love poem [...] can do, too: Experiences that seem similar, even identical [...] seem interesting and new [...] because of the way in which they are put into words. And those ways in turn suggest (they don’t state) why the people in the poem did what they did, how they came to feel as they do, what it’s like to be them.

Burt’s suggestion is ultimately that the better journalism is not only an accurate chronology of what’s happened but, *involves* the reader, perhaps emotionally.

This approach is indeed confirmed by the foreign correspondents I talked to. As Tristan McConnell—foreign correspondent based in Nairobi who works for *The Times* of London, *Monocle* and the *Global Post* among other organisations—describes his writing:

I do not want to bore the readers quoting from a bunch of reports or anything like that. What the reader wants is to share the experience of being in that place with me, so I try to put as much colour and description [...] as I can. If I am writing a story, you know, about following the British ambassador [in Somalia] I want the reader to feel like they are sitting in the car with us.

Here is what he actually writes in reporting that story for *AFP* (McConnell 2015), powerfully describing the atmosphere as one arrives at Mogadishu’s airport: ‘The four-square kilometre (1.5 square mile) base is a bizarre expatriate ecosystem of muscled and tattooed private security contractors, ambitious young diplomats, jaded aid workers, furtive spies, uniformed soldiers and businessmen with an unusually high risk threshold.’

### **Creative writing about journalism: The benefits**

So there is a connection, in the writing practice and even in the aims of showing a hidden reality to the reader, between poetry and journalism. But why writing creatively *about* journalism? Creative writing and storytelling could be used not only to promote greater public involvement with academic research. They are also an opportunity for researchers to reflect on their data. In this section I am spelling out the methodological benefits of creative writing in journalism research. They are accompanied by examples of poems that illustrate different ways in which creative writing can complement academic texts.

Poems 2, 3, and 4 relate to a comparative study of foreign correspondents in London and Oslo (Archetti 2014a), particularly highlights the thinking processes of the researcher and the opportunity to bring the interviewees to life through anecdotes and small details that would have not been included in the traditional academic text. Poems 5, 6, and 7 are used to create a vivid and sensorial picture of one of the locations where correspondents covering Somalia research their stories: Mogadishu. This set of poems particularly emphasizes the deceptive nature of the environment, both highly safe and—especially for white Westerners—highly dangerous, as well as giving the reader a sense of *what it feels like* to be there.

*A first opportunity for the researcher to reflect on the data.* My aim was to write one poem following each interview on the basis of what I remembered from the exchange with the journalist. As such, each piece reflects what I instinctively perceived as important and/or

curious/worth of attention after the conversation with a correspondent. Poems 2, 3 and 4 borrow from “found poetry” (Glesne 1997; Lahman and Richard 2013) in so far as they rearrange to greater or lesser extent the interviewee’s words, but also contain some of the questions that popped into my mind. As such, they were not only a first opportunity to reflect on what I had heard but also, as I found out, a way to do so in a free and unconstrained way. The pieces simply had to loosely revolve around the focus of my study—the way urban space and infrastructure affected the newsgathering routines and practices of foreign journalists.

Reflective practices and methods have particularly developed from the 1990s. Gary Rolfe and Lyn Gardner (2005), for example, make a strong case for reflective writing in nursing research. Reflexivity is taken as the ‘ability to critically examine and use previous experience to influence further action’ (Jasper 2005: 258, n. 1). They advocate a ‘reflexive model of evidence-based practice’ that does not dismiss as ‘opinion’ or ‘anecdote’ the ‘reflection on our practice’ and ‘gut feelings’ (Rolfe and Gardner 2005: 306). This appears particularly suitable to a field that, not differently from what happens in examining the situated experiences of foreign correspondents, deals with ‘interactions between unique individuals, with unique experiences...in unique situations (Sarvimaki 1988 in Rolfe and Gardner 2005: 302) and is concerned about difference rather than similarity (Rolfe and Gardner 2005: 308).

*A context for innovation.* The practice of creative writing can work as a method for establishing more imaginative connections among ideas and reading unusual patterns in the data gathered. As Jasper (2005: 252) writes, reflective writing ‘enables the researcher to draw together and express fledgling ideas and connections and build these as they become more substantial.’

*A map of the evolving thinking of the researcher.* The poems make apparent those gut feelings and impressions that inevitably guide the researcher in the interpretation of the results. As Ivan Brady explains, objectivity is ‘fictional’: ‘because all research necessarily starts with an observer moving through the world as personally-situated sensuous and intellectual being’ (Brady 2009: xi). Providing these verbal sketches is a way to document the thinking processes and perhaps even the emotional aspects of research that would otherwise be hidden. This ultimately enables the researcher to achieve greater intellectual honesty. The poems, in this sense, are the equivalent of stating who funded the research at the end of an article to make more transparent the processes through which conclusions were drawn from the data—what Melanie Jasper (2005:250, her emphasis) calls ‘a verifiable *audit-trail* of the research process.’ The poem becomes thus the glass through which the reader can see the hidden mechanisms of the research machine.

*Bringing back the researcher into the research.* Academic writing removes the “I” from the writing in the attempt to present findings as objective. However, as Stefanos Mantzoukas (2005) explains, although the positivist paradigm is based on the belief that bias can be eliminated, this is never possible: ‘all research starts not just from anywhere, but from somewhere specific, and that is the specific individual researcher’ (p. 284). As he continues: ‘To suggest that the researcher can be the central figure of the research, responsible for every decision made regarding the study, and at the same time argue that those decisions did not bear the researcher’s personal input is [...] schizophrenic’ (ibid.: 290-291).

*Poem 2.*

**London - 40 minutes/no space**

In London real rooms

costs too much:

virtual global offices



pop up in cyberspace  
while editorial meetings  
take place, weekly,  
inside cafés.

Living within town boundaries  
makes no difference  
to being out:  
40 minutes on the tube  
East or West  
whichever route.

Do not write *what*  
but *why*.  
Be different from the crowd.  
Look for the unexplored aspect  
Where? Wherever!  
among tweets or the reactions,  
even by the passersby.

Find a personal story,  
on *LinkedIn* maybe,  
get commissioned pieces  
check an ongoing campaign  
—think, for example, of World Refugee Day.

Crowd-source the content  
someone, surely,  
feels strongly about.  
Unpaid contributions  
*à la Huffington Post*  
are ‘more authentic’ and ‘unbiased’  
(I must say I strongly doubt).

The future  
here in London  
as much as in San Francisco, USA  
is internet start-ups:  
reporters who, with the editor,  
live and work  
in the same house.

Communication skills,  
the ability to navigate connections  
are what ultimately matters,  
I would say:  
after a decade in the same place  
you need no help from the FPA.<sup>6</sup>

*Poem 3.*  
**Oslo – 3 Minutes/300 meters**  
Low on the newsworthy

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<sup>6</sup> Foreign Press Association

destinations' list,  
Oslo is the place  
where you have few reasons to be.

The most unexpected, to mention one,  
is that you have fallen in love  
with a Norwegian.  
Alternatively it's where the competitor  
from *Al Arabiya* is based,  
—not clear how he landed there, though  
in the first place.

Reporting about the oil industry  
could be a sound rationale,  
but my interviewee thinks otherwise:  
that colleague came by accident,  
because 'he' changed his mind  
while he was flying  
to Washington from Dubai.

A new Scandinavian cluster  
of Arabic media  
is thus born,  
which might as well  
have been,  
he says,  
in neighbouring Stockholm.

They reported the Breivik trial  
as anybody else,  
although it was a short-lived beat  
because 'there's enough bombings  
in the Middle East.'

The serendipity of the news from this centre  
does not end yet:  
reports of a new Norwegian version  
of a sacred text  
(a Bible)  
resurface six months later  
—why is truly a riddle—  
in the US.

Then the whole affair,  
is on the Norwegian media once more  
because the Nordic public loves its country  
being noticed abroad.

Overall Oslo it's expensive and cold,  
but newsgathering here is not too bad:  
A compact centre of 300 meters square,  
all is 3 minutes apart  
and, since it is shorter to walk,  
you will never need a cab.

*Poem 4.*

**Oslo&Manchester – 1 hour/two countries**

One hour driving distance  
from Manchester  
is the limit  
to reach sources  
and keep costs down  
because when you are freelancer  
you pay the bills.

Strange arrangement:  
a Norwegian foreign correspondent  
reporting about Oslo  
mostly from Manchester  
through fiber optics  
and recording software  
whose sound quality is better  
than the studio's.

*Twitter* makes you feel  
like you are back in the newsroom  
when breaking news used to come in  
and you just waited for the BBC  
to report it  
except now you are at home.

*Facebook*,  
instead,  
to keep contacts  
with friends  
who are colleagues, too,  
and to get hold  
of "normal" people  
(—like me and you?)

At the NIPS<sup>7</sup> common office,  
unlike elsewhere,  
you are not in competition:  
you bounce ideas off and share,  
you get inspired  
by colleagues from Finland  
and *Al-Jazeera*.

Foreign correspondence will always live  
because news consumers  
are uncritical of sources;  
because foreign journalists  
have been living abroad long enough  
to have a network,  
a trusted cluster of contacts  
they can rely on  
at short notice,

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<sup>7</sup> Norges Internasjonale Pressesenter

from the top of their heads.

*Complementing the academic piece of research, i.e. the traditional article or conference paper, that has been produced as a result of a study.* The poems offer an opportunity to include what did not “fit” into the academic article, in this case offering a rounder, more nuanced, and perhaps more entertaining view of the practices described in the article and the locations in which they take place. As Bloor (2012: 43) writes, ‘sociological poetry’ can ‘capture the imagination and convey the human meanings of social facts.’ Richardson (1994: 9), on the opportunity that creative writing offers to connect with the readers, goes as far as saying that ‘poetry is the shortest emotional path between two people.’

*Re-situating vividly the “individual” and the “everyday” into academic research.* The poems offer a glimpse, albeit fleeting, into the life of the correspondents who have been interviewed and their lives. There is a tendency in academic research, in its attempt to achieve generalisation of results, to strip people of their individuality. In so doing academic researchers also drain real life from their data. In the poems the interviewees are being brought back to life through their voices as people as well as their experiences, not just as “sources” of a journal article. The creative writing pieces also restore what Paul Stoller (1992: 508) calls the ‘choppiness of everyday life’—which Sarah Pink (2012: 23) describes as the ‘fluidity [...], or the irregularity, messiness and inconsistency that ethnographers often encounter.’

*Poem 5.* Less than two weeks after this visit the extremist organisation Al-Shabaab attacked Villa Somalia, the presidential palace causing, beyond the eight suicide bombers who detonated themselves, at least another casualty (Deutsche Welle 2014). The “airport compound” is a fortified area enclosing the Aden Adde international airport which also houses the base of UN operations in Somalia, as well as foreign embassies.

### **Trip to Villa Somalia**

Door closes  
sealing  
metal and men  
and electric wires and sweat  
in an armoured safety tin.

The sunset’s blood-shot eye  
stares short-sighted  
through a far too thick window,  
tugs at my sleeve,  
begs to hide in.

A million mattress springs  
come to life under my feet,  
screech loudly,  
fill the steel-plated darkness  
like dying high-pitched crickets out of tune.

I miss half of what’s being said  
by the war reporter with the crew.  
He explains the benefits—I think—  
of Casper’s<sup>8</sup> V-bottomed hull

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<sup>8</sup> The correct name is Casspir, but that is what I heard at the time.

against a multiple mine blast.

Dust on the dark faces  
whose gazes, suspicious, pierce the glass  
to inspect the foreigners,  
their papers.  
Then, lowered the guns,  
they make us pass.

We are now beyond barbed wire,  
the cramped relative security  
of the "airport compound":  
this is the wild land of violence,  
of life-sized lottery,  
where crude probability rules apply.

On a straight, fortified road from A to B  
I count the seconds and hold my breath.  
We are fast, but too predictable.  
'It's enough for "them" to know,'  
as a survivor of a bombing said,  
"...that whoever leaves the gate,  
must necessarily come back."

*Poem 6.*

**Midsummer Dream**

The summer night  
is a warm embrace.  
The smell of the out-of-sight sea  
tingles in my eyes,  
gently brushes my skin  
like damp sticky hair,  
like salty bitter lips.

Shy fragments of shells  
in the sand,  
stolen for a second by the torch,  
plunge back into the darkness  
of whispered voices,  
furtive steps on gravel,  
soft lights being turned off.

Until dawn  
silently washes ashore  
like a dimly glowing jellyfish.  
Shadows of military containers  
and stacked sandbags slowly emerge.  
Amid few fleeting drops of rain,  
a flock of ibis  
rummages in the dirt.

*Poem 7.*

**Mogadishu Night Garden**

Inside the airport compound  
and its layers of razor wire,  
beyond the Hesco barriers,  
the checkpoints,  
protected from enemy fire

between the UN bar  
and a toilet block,  
in the darkness  
outside the door  
of a metal container  
that serves as a flat

there is a row  
of faintly lit solar lights  
shaped like tulips—  
a homely runway  
in the sand.

### **Conclusion: The deeper questions**

This article is an invitation to question what we know about journalism: to realize that there are issues related to objectivity in conducting research that go beyond the mere correct application of a methodology; that a considerable part of the reality and practices of journalism we study can be neither captured nor expressed through academic enquiry (and texts) alone.

The poems helped me understand that I, as a researcher who should have been objective and detached, was in reality a product of all my previous life history combined: of all the literature I had read, of my own experimentation with creative writing (Archetti 2013a, 2014b, 2014c; 2014d), of nearly forty conversations with foreign journalists, of my stays in Mogadishu and Nairobi meeting NGO workers and professionals engaged in countering violent extremism, of having taken a ride in an armoured vehicle... Just like my interviewees—foreign journalists working in the UK, Norway and the African continent—were the product of unique constellation of relationships that involved people, technologies and material infrastructure and this affected their practices—as I concluded in my academic writing, so was I. This meant that, within the research process, I was far from a neutral collector of information.

Writing poetry also primed me towards paying more attention to feelings and emotions. I started realizing that the very extent to which I was able to extract information from my interviewees did not depend on the mere execution of the “elite interview techniques” I had been so thoroughly trained in. The “success” of a conversation depended not so much on the structuring of my questions or on making sure I fitted them in the time available to the interviewee. A “good interview” depended to a much greater extent on a subtle chemistry based, on either side, on varying degrees of trust, curiosity, a liking of the other person, and gut feeling. Emotion and sensory perceptions during an interview seemed to be playing a crucial role. Why had I never paid attention to this before as a methodological aspect? How would have my data changed had it been a “bad interview” day for either me or the interviewee? What was really my role as an investigator in the research process? What was the nature of the data that I had gathered? Was the very interview material really objective—information that I had picked and categorized according to systematic criteria, as I had

always believed—or had I in fact *co-created* it with my interviewees?<sup>9</sup> To what extent did my findings truly reflect the reality of the everyday practices lived by the correspondents I had interviewed rather than my own bias? Was my study “scientific”? Indeed, could any investigation claim to be so?

Ultimately, the most important lesson of ‘sensuous scholarship,’ as Stoller (1997: 136) puts it, is that of ‘humility’: ‘No matter how learned we may become, no matter how deeply we have mastered a subject, the world, for the sensuous scholar, remains a wondrous place that stirs the imagination and sparks creativity.’

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<sup>9</sup> There are, in fact, many further questions that arise in relation to the co-creation of meaning within the research process, beyond the researcher-participant interaction. Corrine Glesne (1997: 215), for example, writes that ‘poetic transcription’ itself (‘poetic transcription’ is her term for a form of found poetry based on interview scripts) ‘creates a third voice that is neither the interviewee’s nor the researcher’s but is a combination of both. Laura Brearley (2000: n.p.), in addressing the researcher’s relationship with the public, argues that for the reader ‘[t]o engage with research represented in creative form is a creative act in itself.’

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