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CURTIS GILLESPIE

FIGHTING THE UNENLIGHTENMENT

Longform nonfiction in the age of the shortform lie

When *WestWord* asked me to write an essay about longform nonfiction, I was given a deadline of early November. I requested that my deadline be extended for a few weeks beyond the American election, on the not-unreasonable premise that said events might inform the content and tone of the essay.

Thank you, *WestWord*, for the extension.

We are in a precarious moment. I am not referring to threats such as the coronavirus or the climate catastrophe, though these are scary and urgent. Nor am I referring to the attack on democracy by Stooze One and his bootlickers, though I'll come back to that dangerous farce momentarily. There are many problems and divisions and hazards in today's world that we need to address—poverty, homelessness, the income gap, clean water, the patriarchy—so many that it's pointless even to list them all. We've got our work cut out for us for the next generation or two.

But to my mind, the greatest risk we are currently exposed to overarches and contributes to all the above and, not coincidentally, being the point of this essay, is directly linked to the role and value of longform nonfiction. Unless we correct our one all-encompassing problem soon, it's hard to imagine we'll have the wherewithal to solve any of the others properly. David Brooks recently called it an "epistemological crisis" in *The New York Times*, but I'm not as smart as him. What I'm talking about is the imminent extinction of reality.

Two linked events from the disgraceful aftermath of the U.S. election, both press conferences helmed by Rudy Giuliani, stand as perfect illustrations of the crisis. The first was held on Saturday,



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November 7, 2020, and was billed as the big reveal of all the ways Donald Trump had the election stolen from him. Trump tweeted out that Giuliani was holding a presser at the Four Seasons in downtown Philadelphia. Everyone, including himself, assumed the swanky Four Seasons Hotel, which was where the media naturally started gathering. The hotel then tweeted that no such event was being held. After a few minutes of Twitter silence, Trump then informed his nearly 90 million Twitter followers that this mindbogglingly significant event was, in fact, going to take place at some random place called Four Seasons Total Landscaping.

Giuliani or one of his minions obviously had just dialled up “Four Seasons” and booked a press conference without bothering to check to make sure it was a hotel in downtown Philadelphia and not a shabby cinder block building in Philly’s rough north end on the same street as the Delaware Valley Cremation Centre and the Fantasy Island porn shop promising “viewing booths, movies and lotions” on its sign out front. It was here that the Trump campaign assembled the world’s media to blow the roof off a vast conspiracy. As Giuliani spoke in front of a garage door plastered with hurriedly attached TRUMP signs, the camera angle showed a Hazardous Chemicals sign prominently screwed to the wall behind him. The first person Giuliani called to the podium as a witness to voter fraud turned out to be a convicted child sex offender.

That was just the opening act. During the second Giuliani press conference a week later, in which claims were made that the long-deceased Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez was part of a vast communist/Republican/Democrat joint conspiracy to steal the election from Trump, Giuliani had a meltdown. Literally. Black fluid trickled from his scalp and sideburns down his cheeks, creating twin lines of running hair dye that eventually formed a kind of horror movie special effect, making it look like he was wearing someone else’s face, Hannibal Lecter-style.

And I haven’t even brought up QAnon yet.

In classic longform nonfiction style, however, I’m now going to switch gears. We’ll return to Rudy and his antics shortly, but before getting into how all this relates to longform nonfiction in the age of the shortform lie, I want to speak to the terminology I’m using. I’ve been writing and teaching and lecturing in this genre (and others) for 25 years or so, and I’ve still yet to come up with a fully satisfying term to describe it. As every purveyor of the form knows, you aren’t eligible for membership in the club unless you can debate at length, beer in hand, the pros and cons of the various descriptors. I have used and/or heard used the terms journalism, literary journalism, narrative journalism, creative journalism, longform journalism, longform narrative, nonfiction, longform nonfiction, creative nonfiction and reportage. Each term has its granular differentiations and advantages and disadvantages, so I won’t argue with you if you want to use one instead of another. The one I find most apt by definition—reportage—always sounds high-falutin’ to me when I say it, so I rarely use it.

I chose longform nonfiction for this essay, because I think it most accurately describes both what the world needs right now and what we are aspiring to produce. *Longform* allows for and encourages, one hopes, depth and context. *Nonfiction* indicates a willingness and the discipline, one hopes, to remain tethered to reality. The added advantage of longform nonfiction is that when done right it also produces a deeply satisfying reading experience.

So what exactly is longform nonfiction and why does it matter? Why do we need it in our toolbox to combat the assault on reality? Longform nonfiction is simple to describe and hard to do well. It is a combination of deep reporting on events of a factual basis presented in a format that has room to breathe, that is long enough to offer context, and that is written and edited to allow for

greater meaning and larger patterns to emerge from the judicious accumulation and placement of detail. It is rigorously fact-checked. It avoids drawing attention to style, though it can be stylishly written. It presumes a certain level of intelligence and curiosity from the reader, but more importantly, requires their attention. Every great piece of longform nonfiction is, at its heart, asking a question. The delivery of the piece provides the material needed to answer the question. Most readers would find such articles in magazines, though some newspapers do longform occasionally.

Longform nonfiction is bolted to reality, but a writer has some latitude with language and structure and even motivational investigation. Interestingly, even though it’s made up, literary fiction is more restrictive than longform nonfiction, because we demand bulletproof psychological and emotional authenticity from our fiction. Fiction is the freediving of creativity—the deeper you go, the higher the pressure, the higher the pressure, the less scope for error. If one detail of a character’s psychology in a novel rings hollow, the whole thing usually collapses for me. With longform nonfiction, however, writers can suffer the occasional minor mistake of fact or interpretation without harming the overall value of the piece, so long as there is full transparency around the process and correction. Readers forgive mistakes in longform nonfiction as long as the writer isn’t trying to hide anything. Writing fiction is akin to mining for a diamond that, once found, needs to be pure to make it to the cutting stage, whereas longform nonfiction is like a metallurgical smelting process that can tolerate a certain percentage of impurities.

It’s perhaps also worth differentiating longform nonfiction from daily journalism, which is what most newspaper, television and website content consists of. Daily journalism tends towards the old-school, inverted pyramid style of reporting that focuses on gathering facts and presenting them without fanfare as close to the top of the story as possible, under the premise that most people just want “the news” and don’t have time every day to read a mystery novel that makes you wait until the end to find out what happened. The daily journalism format is crucially important in a reality-based society, but it is inadequate as a sole source of information. Daily journalism is the vital growing and harvesting of staple ingredients. Longform nonfiction makes a gourmet meal out of those ingredients.

And a quick word about narrative as it relates to longform nonfiction. I remain an advocate of marrying narrative to research because it creates for the reader something that is both educational and entertaining. Narrative—telling a story with characters and a dramatic arc—is an elegant way to merge persuasive writing with principled research. Unfortunately, narrative is also used today in everything from home renovation television to political campaigns to pharmaceutical commercials. Narrative is a little like atomic energy; in the right hands it can be a force for good, but in the wrong hands can be used for ill. Still, when used well and ethically, narrative is a great way for longform to engage with readers. And that matters. Lecturing people rarely achieves the desired result. Giving people a reason to listen stands a chance. Remember the words of the director Billy Wilder: “I have ten commandments. The first nine are, Thou shalt not bore. The tenth is, Thou shalt have right of final cut.” People are attracted to stories, but we direly

need stories that nourish us with the truth. We are a society at risk of synaptic wasting syndrome. Our brains are shrinking. That's not a metaphor. Ongoing research shows that the more social media we consume and the more visuals over written words we consume and the less we think, the smaller our brains are getting. Literally smaller. Think about that (if you can; if you can't, consider yourself released from finishing this essay). Twitter is the apex of the shortform lie and a kind of intellectual bulimia.

All of which makes one wonder why people choose lies over reality. I think the answer is probably bottomless in detail but simple in concept: grievance. When people feel hard done by and without options, they gravitate towards that which supplies them with a rationale for their perceived state of affairs. Social media then uses algorithms to deepen and intensify the separation from reality, which further separates us from one another. Longform nonfiction offers evidence-based explanations for the state of the world. Agreed-upon facts bring people together. The problem is that those facts are not always comforting. I can, of course, hear the words of those who disagree: *That's just your opinion. Trump did good things. The left is more dangerous than the right. I don't care what the experts say.* And so on. I am not advocating for a political point of view, but the reality (ha-ha) is that recent surveys in the U.S. have shown that nearly 80 percent of Republicans feel that the recent election was fraudulent. Many right-wingers do not believe in wearing a mask to combat coronavirus. Twenty-five percent of Americans believe the sun revolves around the earth. And, okay, maybe I'd better mention QAnon after all? Tens of millions of Republicans believe, *believe*, that Democrats are pedophiles who drink the blood of babies. That is not reality. The keyword in all this is *believe*, as opposed to *know*. Belief requires passion. Knowledge requires facts.

Which brings us back to the greater meaning and significance of Rudy and his press conferences and what longform nonfiction might hopefully one day tell us about them. Of course, any person of normal intelligence could see the obvious, which is that Trump was a narcissistic monster who would have happily, and probably literally, tossed his supporters off a cliff if it would have helped him stay in power. That's not the real insight here. But what we need longform nonfiction to explore, using Rudy's pressers as the starting point, is how deeply tied incompetence is to mendacity and why they so often go together, how narcissism leads to mistakes, how symbols of dishonesty appear organically, how patterns of corruption emerge and disappear like a surfacing whale and how to connect them. We can learn all these things from a longform nonfiction exploration that other forms of journalism aren't equipped for. It takes time, effort, talent, space, decent pay, a good publisher and real editorial understanding. Giuliani's pressers were perfect representations of the gulf between what we're being *told* is real (*It's a conspiracy!*) and what is real (*These people are lying fools.*). That makes them historically invaluable.

What longform nonfiction can do with all this material is make it crystal clear that the real danger is not being bamboozled today by a group of clowns whose manifest amorality is only matched by their breathtaking incompetence. No, the real danger is how such events represent the assault on reality, which is at risk of becoming

the VHS tape of the social compact. Trump and Viktor Orban and Recep Erdogan and Jair Bolsonaro and Vladimir Putin want citizens struggling to find meaning to think that reality is not real. If there is no meaning in fact, then nothing is a lie. You speak and act only to gain and hold power, not to do anything productive with that power.

We don't have time to play games anymore. It's time to get real about reality. We are past the point of philosophical parlour games. There is a single, unifying reality we are part of. We live on the planet earth. We breathe oxygen. We are made up of cells. The earth does rotate around the sun. We need food and water to survive. We reproduce. We are born. We die. There are facts, there is a reality. Yet reality is under assault every day by those seeking to create division to retain power. It is that simple. Countering that force requires the deployment of serious tools.

One of which is longform nonfiction. Fact, reason, rationality, induction, logic, verifiability—these are the pillars of longform nonfiction. Great storytelling and an eye for detail are the cladding that goes on the framework of reasoned argument. By the time you read this, Trump will be out of the White House and Giuliani may never give another press conference. But I guarantee you will be reading about Four Seasons Total Landscaping forever, and not just because they are now selling a line of t-shirts featuring slogans such as, "Make America Rake Again" and "Lawn and Order." No, we will hear about Four Seasons again because it's precisely the detail that a skilled writer of longform nonfiction is going to rely on to kickstart a deep dive into the link between corruption and stupidity. We as readers and citizens will laugh and groan as we read it, but we will also be gifted with a greater comprehension of why and how bad actors attempt to manipulate society for their own gain and what we can do to combat it. We will understand how Rudy's antics fit into the larger historical pattern of political deception, so we'll recognize these patterns ever earlier when they emerge from others in the future, as they undoubtedly will. That writer will be doing a service to readers and to society, because through an artful marriage of research and storytelling, a deeper insight into reality will come into focus.

And maybe if we're lucky, we'll even learn what kind of hair dye Rudy uses. ■

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Curtis Gillespie has written five books and many magazine articles. His work has appeared in The Walrus, The Paris Review, enRoute, Saturday Night, Toronto Life, Eighteen Bridges, The New York Times, Western Living, Alberta Views and many other outlets. He has won seven National Magazine Awards from 21 nominations, including a record-tying four awards in 2014.