[“Smart editorial, smart readers, and smart ad solutions”: Slate makes a case for long-form on the web](http://www.niemanlab.org/2010/07/smart-editorial-smart-readers-and-smart-ad-solutions-slate-makes-a-case-for-long-form-on-the-web/)

By [Megan Garber](http://www.niemanlab.org/author/mgarber/) /  July 14  /  10 a.m.

Via blogs, or, more likely, Twitter, you might have come across the breezy term “[tl;dr](http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=tl%3Bdr).” Which is short — appropriately — for “too long; didn’t read.”

Yes. You know the [conventional wisdom](http://www.beet.tv/2009/08/long-form-journalism-on-the-web-is-not-working-timecom-managing-editor.html): long-form journalism doesn’t do well on the web. Our attention spans are too short and sentences are too long and and we’re too easily distrac — oooh, Macy’s is having a sale! — and, anyway, complex narratives are inefficient for a culture that wants its information short, sweet, and yesterday. Long, carefully wrought articles are tasty, sure; online, though, the news we consume is best served up quick-n-easy. The web isn’t Chez Panisse so much as a series of Sizzlers.

Whether or not that kind of thinking is valid from the psychological perspective, a more relevant question, for our purposes, is whether it’s valid from the financial one. What kind of value proposition does long-form journalism represent in the digital world? Can it be monetized? Or, as behavioral economists might put it: Does long-form, you know, work?

One piece of good news — good news, that is, if you’re a fan of the genre — comes courtesy of [Slate](http://www.slate.com/).

The right readers

You may recall the online magazine’s [Fresca initiative](http://www.observer.com/2009/media/plotz-thickens-slate-editor-sends-staffers) — so named for editor [David Plotz](http://twitter.com/davidplotz)’s passionate and non-ironic [obsession](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7NT09_9eXDE) with the [grapefruity beverage](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fresca) — which launched last year to give Slate writers and editors the opportunity to focus on long-form work. Essentially, the fellowship program requires that every editorial staff member at Slate (Plotz recently added copy editors to the Fresca pool) take four to six weeks off from their normal jobs, paid — and use that time to produce one in-depth piece (or, often, a series of in-depth pieces) on a subject that compels them. So far, the project has netted such praiseworthy specimens of long-form as, among others, Tim Noah’s [analysis](http://www.slate.com/id/2208971/%26reason%3D0) of why the U.S. hasn’t endured another successfully executed terror attack since 9/11 and Julia Turner’s [look](http://www.slate.com/id/2245644) at the fascinating complexities of signage and June Thomas’ [examination](http://www.slate.com/id/2229630) of American dentistry and Dahlia Lithwick’s crowd-sourced [foray](http://www.slate.com/id/2227430) into chick-lit authorship and John Dickerson’s [reclamation](http://www.slate.com/id/2250624) of risk-taking after the financial crash gave that quintessential American practice a bad name.

The other thing the initiative has netted? Pageviews. They’ve been in the millions, a Slate rep told me: over 4 million for Noah’s piece, over 3.5 million for Thomas’, nearly 3 million for Turner’s. That’s especially significant considering the length of the pieces, which often run in the tens of thousands of words. Combine that with New York Times Magazine editor Gerry Marzorati’s [claim](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/24/business/media/24askthetimes.html?_r=2&pagewanted=all), last year, that “contrary to conventional wisdom, it’s our longest pieces that attract the most online traffic” — and, come to think of it, with tablet computing’s promise of portable, pleasurable reading experiences — and “tl;dr”: you are on watch.

Pageviews, though, are only part of the picture. “The raw traffic numbers matter to me — I like them, they’re good, and they’re certainly good for advertisers,” Plotz says. But the Fresca pieces are about more than, say, Huffingtonian eyeball-harnessing and traffic-baiting (PHOTOS! SLIDESHOWS! CLICKCLICKPLEASECLICK!); they’re also about brand-building. Plotz got the idea for the fellowships, he told me, through his earlier experience as a general-assignment reporter at Slate, under [Michael Kinsley](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_Kinsley) and, later, [Jacob Weisberg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacob_Weisberg). As part of that position, he got to do longer pieces of the Fresca variety; and not only did those stories “make me enthusiastic about coming to work,” he says, but they also “clearly contributed to building the brand of Slate as a place you go for excellent journalism.”

And when Plotz [took over the magazine’s editorship](http://www.slate.com/id/2193003/) — in 2008, at pretty much the height of Media’s Existential Crisis — he realized that “in order to really thrive, in order to have the kind of committed, excellent, well-educated, media-engaged audience that we’ve always had — and to build that audience — we had to do something more than just 1,500 word pieces, and more than just explainers.”

In other words, for Slate, long-form’s value proposition is also reputational, rather than strictly financial. The Fresca pieces are community and commodity ratifiers — subtle indications, to advertisers and audiences alike, that the magazine cares as much about informing users as attracting them. “Our job is not necessarily to build Slate into a magazine that has 100 million readers,” Plotz points out. “It’s to make sure we have 2 million or 5 million or 8 million of the rightreaders — readers who are the smartest, most engaged, most influential, most media-literate people around. That’s more attractive to advertisers, it makes the community of readers around the site more energetic and more lively, and it’s a way to distinguish ourselves from some of the more aggregation-heavy sites, or some of the single-person blog sites, or some of the commodity news sites.”

It’s a wide-angle view of the reader/marketer relationship that is also reflected in Slate’s business-side messaging. Take, for example, the magazine’s [pitch](http://www.slate.com/id/2078020) to advertisers (entitled “Slate: The Online Magazine for the Smartest Generation”), which uses the term “smart” eight times on a single, short page, by my count — four of them in the declaration that “Slate is unrivaled at combining smart editorial, smart readers, and smart ad solutions to produce the smartest possible media buy.” That’s an approach similar to the Gawker Media [strategy](http://www.niemanlab.org/2010/2010/03/a-reader-affection-formula-gawker-creates-a-metric-for-branded-traffic/) of leveraging “recurring reader affection,” rather than relying on the blunter instrument of simple traffic metrics — and one that emphasizes the holistic quality of the audience, as a commercial entity, over its simple quantity. It’s not the size of the boat, and all that.

Engaging readers and writers

The reputation-based approach is of a piece with Slate’s broader strategy of engagement: user affection is advertiser affection. And both of those are bolstered by producer affection — a smart, engaged audience being in large part the result of work created by a smart, engaged staff. “As a reporting and writing process, this is what had attracted me to journalism almost twenty years ago,”[John Dickerson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Dickerson_%28journalist%29) told me of his Fresca-enabled [series](http://www.slate.com/id/2250624). And “it was wonderful,” he says, to translate that process into a digital product — to harness the multimedia power of the web to produce “that long, narrative, nonfiction storytelling that’s always been so interesting to me in the course of my career.”

As fellow Fresc-er [Tim Noah](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timothy_Noah) puts it: “I can’t speak highly enough about the project. I think it’s probably the most exciting thing that’s been going on at Slate for the last couple years.”

Leveraging the personal passions of journalists — as opposed to their skills and talents alone — is an idea that’s getting more and more traction in a media world where standing out from the crowd is a business-side mandate as well as an editorial one. There’s Google’s famous [20-percent time](http://googleblog.blogspot.com/2006/05/googles-20-percent-time-in-action.html) — which has led to personal-interest-fueled innovations like, for example, [Google News](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Google_News) — and, in journalism proper, the [Journal Register Company](http://www.journalregister.com/)’s [implementation](http://www.niemanlab.org/2010/2010/06/the-art-of-the-public-cover-letter-journal-register-staff-apply-for-idealab-spots-via-blog-comments/) of an[innovation team](http://jxpaton.wordpress.com/2010/05/23/independence-and-the-idealab/) that will devote 25 percent of its workweek to stepping back from the much-maligned vagaries of the Daily Grind. One of the challenges journalism is facing, Noah points out, is in matching ambition to ability in reporting. And though “money is a big obstacle,” in general, he says, “none of the Fresca pieces have really been terribly extravagant in terms of their cost.” They’ve been extravagant instead with the one resource that, in journalism, is even more precious than money: time. The Fresca stories are a declaration, Dickerson says, that “this is the kind of commitment we have to storytelling: being in-depth in a world of tiny little bites of information.”

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