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Debating Point: 'Articles' or 'Essays'? A View from the Bridge

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Like many scholars working in media history, I am not a native. I have emigrated from another discipline, in my case literature, in English. Nor have I completely made the move. Having taught myself the language and explored the area, I remain on a bridge between where I came from and where I am going, clear about the direction of travel, but aware of what is behind. So I am especially alive to diction, and the language of criticism.

Questions about our (new) field have a long history. What is or are the name or names of this area of work — media history, print culture, the press, or the history of the book? Does it constitute a 'field', or does it consist of an area of interdisciplinary research made up of the overlapping outskirts of established disciplines such as history, literature, sociology, economics, or new disciplines such as cultural studies? I have long thought it a field, becoming aware, as I made the move from the study of English to that of the press, of how different the land lay, how inappropriate literary criteria were, and how misleading they could be as a filter to read the press.

When my colleagues and I were engaged in producing the *Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Journalism* a decade ago, one of our most interesting tasks was populating the language of the field by compiling a list of entries on key terms.¹ These included readily identified topics, such as anonymity and signature, scissors and paste journalism, and typesetting, but also more formal and theoretical topics such as columns, crime reporting, dailies, frequency, gossip, literary replication, magazines, miscellanies, multiple editions, paper, price, reviews, size and format, supplements, the telegraph, titbits, and title changes. Largely, we did not get down to basic nomenclature at item level except for correspondence, leaders, and reviews.

It is a basic building block of the press — the article — that I want to interrogate here. A frequent alternative usage among us, especially by literary scholars (where I come from), is the essay. There is a particular wrinkle in the case of this usage (article and essay), as researchers from literature often study the periodical press, not the press across the board and not daily or weekly newspapers, which tend to be the subject of historians. Moreover, this epistemological division between these branches of the

1 *DNCJ: Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Journalism*, ed. by Laurel Brake and Marysa Demoor (Ghent and London: Academia Press and British Library, 2009, print edition; C19, ProQuest, 2009ff (with semi-annual updates), online edition www.dncj.ugent.be; C19, ProQuest, 2016, 2nd edn, ebook).

press has historical antecedents, favoured in the first half of the nineteenth century by journalists and press directories, antecedents that perhaps underlie this division of work, if not endorse it. That notwithstanding, many of our colleagues commonly refer to the contents of periodicals as ‘essays’ rather than ‘articles’, a usage that appears to be an act of appropriation, from journalism to literature; and it facilitates the move common to literature of extricating items — or ‘essays’ — from the miscellany and restoring them to the literary oeuvre. I favour the use of the word article on the basis that as a media historian writing in my adopted field of media history, article is the appropriate term to identify a prose item in a periodical issue, a journalism format.

Moreover, there is historical precedent for this substitution. I take the view that it was established in the field of English literature in the nineteenth century, just as the field was in formation, precisely with the process of the transformation of journalism into literature in mind. In 1865, Matthew Arnold collected some of his articles from the press under the title ‘Essays on Criticism’,² having the year before published an article in the *National Review*, which was entitled ‘The Functions of Criticism at the Present Time’.³ I have written a detailed history of this 1864–65 article elsewhere, but the salient point here is that Arnold placed the article in an issue of the *National Review* which announced the change of its frequency from quarterly to semi-annual.⁴ Its new manifesto announced its intention to transcend the limitations of journalism in its New Series to avoid the link to the ‘day to day’ and reviews, to substitute a greater adherence to principle, and to publish essays that would displace articles linked to news and topicality. To further sever its link with journalism and to draw closer to a literary model, the *National Review* abandoned anonymity for signature.⁵ This is the background to the tendency of present-day literary critics to call periodical articles essays, and imperceptibly move their criticism into the literary field. Of course, the field in which critical discourse is located helps determine the way in which criticism is framed. So, I do think that the language (which indicates the field) matters. Readers of this piece may wish to raise the question of ‘literary journalism’, a form that has flourished in the United States. This category may well be useful retrospectively to frame discussions of nineteenth-century journalism, but it seems to me that the arguments — about use of the nomenclature of journalism, articles and essays, and the category of ‘literary journalism’ — need to be made, and the issues interrogated.

It would be good to read replies to this article.

Laurel Brake is Professor Emerita of Literature and Print Culture at Birkbeck, University of London, where she is an Honorary Fellow. She is the author of *Print in Transition and Subjugated Knowledges*, and co-editor of books and databases on the press, including *ncse* (Nineteenth-Century Serials Edition), a free digital edition of seven nineteenth-century periodicals and *DNCJ* (*Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Journalism*), co-edited with Marysa Demoor. She co-edited *WT Stead, Newspaper Revolutionary* in 2012, a special issue of the journal *19* on Stead and in 2015 a book on the *News of the World and the British Press, 1843–2011*.

2 Matthew Arnold, *Essays in Criticism* (London and Cambridge: Macmillan, 1865).

3 Matthew Arnold, ‘The Functions of Criticism at the Present Time’, *National Review*, 19 (November 1864), 230–51.

4 For the full case of Arnold vs journalism, see Laurel Brake, ‘Culture Wars? Arnold’s *Essays in Criticism* and the Rise of Journalism 1865–1895’, in *Conflict and Difference in Nineteenth-Century Literature*, ed. by Dinah Birch and Mark Llewellyn (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 201–12.

5 Brake, ‘Culture Wars?’, p. 204.