

who own, and hire, and fire, and set budgets determine the values of the medium.”

For observers less radical than Sinclair, the rise of professionalism and the construction of a “Chinese wall” separating a newspaper’s editorial and business sides came to be seen as solutions. The authors acknowledge that professionalism “has provided a measure of autonomy for journalists from commercial pressures, and it has placed a premium upon factual accuracy.” But Sinclair’s skepticism about “professional journalism’s basic claims of fairness and social neutrality” has been justified by subsequent developments. “In professional journalism,” the authors argue, “business is assumed to be the natural steward of society, while labor is seen as a less benevolent force and left politics generally are held in suspicion.”

Deregulation of broadcasting and “lax

enforcement” of antitrust laws, the authors say, have put “the U.S. media system in the hands of a small number of colossal conglomerates.” They pay high prices for media properties and demand high returns. “The logical result has been a reduction in resources for journalism, a decline in costly and controversial investigative reporting, and a softening up of journalistic standards.” Business journalism flourishes, while labor coverage has nearly vanished. And media owners have increasingly breached the “Chinese wall.” One prominent journalist, quitting his job as editor of *The Chicago Tribune*, said the “corporate takeover” of the news had killed journalism. He is not alone in that view. The situation today, conclude the authors, is “not entirely unlike the one found by Sinclair and his compatriots 80-plus years ago.”

The Maxim Way

“Does Size Matter?” by Michael Scherer and “The Curse of Tom Wolfe” by Michael Shapiro, in *Columbia Journalism Review* (Nov.–Dec. 2002), 200 Alton Pl., Marion, Ohio 43302.

In our breakneck jet-set age, long-form magazine articles have shrunk so much that in some places they’ve *poof!* disappeared entirely, leaving only contrails of photos, captions, and ads. What remains is the *Maxim* model, bite-sized advice pieces, space-devouring illustrations, and grab ‘n’ go anecdotes, perfect for the “chronically over-stimulated.” The day of the high-impact narrative that gets people thinking and talking—and maybe even changes the world—is done.

Slow down a minute, writes Scherer, an assistant editor at *Columbia Journalism Review*. Lengthy, elaborate pieces are flourishing. Even *Maxim*, the successful sex ‘n’ sports “lad mag” whose editor sneers at such behemoths, regularly runs 4,000- to 5,000-word pieces.

The conventional wisdom has it that serious magazine journalism is a victim of time-pressured readers, especially young readers who have their eyes glued to the TV. That’s not all wrong. Surveys show, for example, that younger readers spend about 29 minutes reading each issue of *The Atlantic Monthly* and *The New Yorker*, down from 43 a dozen years ago. Yet researchers at the University of Maryland report that Americans actually have

more free time than ever before, and that younger folk—single, childless, and often still in school—have tons of leisure time. Reading remains as popular as ever. And while magazine sales have been flat for 10 years, the number of magazines has jumped 40 percent.

Therein lies a clue to what really ails the long magazine article, Scherer believes: People have far more choices than ever before, not only in magazines but in all media. In some ways, this has fostered illusions about the decline of serious writing. Long articles often do look shorter and sweeter now, but often only because they’ve been fitted with pull-quotes, graphs, and other “access points” by editors desperate to claim readers’ attention. New niche-market magazines such as the shopping-obsessed, paragraph-phobic *Lucky* have been born, but there’s no evidence that they’ve stolen readers from what former *New Yorker* editor Tina Brown once quaintly called “text-based” magazines.

Shapiro, an assistant professor of journalism at Columbia University, doesn’t think long articles are a dead form, either. They’re just not much fun to read, he says. Most now follow the same rubric: “anecdote; set-up graph;

scene, digression, scene, quote from Harvard sociologist”—leading to “a numbing predictability.”

Of course, magazine journalism has come a long way since the 1950s. The New Journalism, that gritty, involved, first-person form popularized in the 1960s by Tom Wolfe, Hunter S. Thompson, and Joan Didion, was every English composition teacher’s dream: New Journalism showed and did not tell, and varied in form while making a point. But along the way, style dethroned the story, Shapiro claims. As Wolfe wrote in 1973, “The proof of

one’s technical mastery as a writer becomes paramount and the demonstration of moral points becomes secondary.”

A great magazine story can still make people take notice. A recent example: William Langewiesche’s 70,000-word serialized report on the recovery of the World Trade Center site in *The Atlantic Monthly*. The biggest threat to the long-form article, Scherer suggests, isn’t pea-brained readers, but editors who believe their own condescending blather about what readers want.

SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY & ENVIRONMENT

King Sugar

“Sugar Rush” by Karen Schmidt, in *New Scientist* (Oct. 26, 2002),
151 Wardour St., London, England W1F 8WE.

Move over, DNA, so-called blueprint of life! There’s a new player in town, one that’s actually been here all along but has been dismissed as unimportant. Now scientists know better: Sugar molecules play a leading role in the intricate drama of life.

“Until recently, biologists thought that living things used [sugar molecules] mainly for storing energy, as a structural material (in the form of cellulose, for example) or perhaps as mere decorations on the surfaces of cells,” says Schmidt, a California-based science writer. It turns out, however, “that sugars are involved in almost every aspect of biology, from recognizing pathogens, to blood clotting, to enabling sperm to penetrate an ovum.”

One reason sugar molecules remained hidden in plain sight for so long is their daunting complexity. They are built up from simple sugars, such as glucose, which are linked together in massive molecules that can contain more than 200 units. Often they form chains, but they also take the form of “intricately branched structures that decorate the surfaces of cells like a forest of sugary filigree.” In addition, atoms can be attached to the basic simple sugars, subtly altering their properties.

“Although genes don’t code for sugars themselves, in the way they code for proteins, they do code for the enzymes that our bodies use to build the sugars,” explains Schmidt.

Biologists began to open their eyes to sugars’ vital role in the late 1980s, when researchers isolated the first gene for an enzyme that adds sugars to fats and proteins, a process called glycosylation. In 1994, a team of researchers led by Jarney Marth at the University of California, San Diego, “found that unborn mice in which one glycosylation enzyme had been disabled developed misshapen hearts and died before birth.” Another mutation caused mice to develop an autoimmune illness like the human disease lupus. The discovery that people who lack a key sugar on a protein that transports iron into cells develop liver disorders and other problems led to a hunt for other such sugar defects, notes Hudson Freeze, a researcher at the Burnham Institute in La Jolla, California. Since the mid-1990s, 13 genetic disorders have been identified as “congenital disorders of glycosylation.” Even many common diseases, such as rheumatoid arthritis, have been found to have a sugar link.

Scientists now consider sugars so important that they’ve given them “an ‘ome’ of their own,” says Schmidt. “Just as the ‘genome’ of a creature refers to its entire set of genes, and its ‘proteome’ to its set of proteins, the ‘glycome’ of an organism or cell encompasses all the sugars it makes.” “This is one of the great frontiers of biochemistry,” says biochemist Gerald Hart of Johns Hopkins University. “We are where DNA was in 1950.”