



Ira Glass

About Ira Glass

Ira's first job in radio was in the summer after high school, writing twenty jokes a day for a Baltimore proto-shock jock named Johnny Walker. When he was 19, in 1978, Glass became an intern in the promotions department at National Public Radio's network headquarters in Washington DC. The network was just a few years old and it was still possible to walk in the door and talk your way into an internship, even if you'd never heard any of their programs.



After that, Ira worked on nearly every NPR news program and did virtually every production job at NPR's Washington headquarters. He's been a tape cutter, newscast writer, desk assistant, editor, associate producer and producer. He's filled in as host of *Talk of the Nation* and *Weekend All Things Considered*. From 1989 until 1995, Ira was a freelance reporter working out of NPR's Chicago Bureau. For two of those years, he covered Chicago school reform for NPR's *All Things Considered*, with two unusual series of reports: each followed one school, for a full year.

This American Life premiered on Chicago's public radio station, WBEZ, in November 1995 and went national in the year following after the staff personally called individual stations and convinced them to air it. The show combines documentary journalism with other kinds of storytelling: radio monologues, found tapes, short fiction and interviews. Sidestepping sensationalism, Ira Glass and his staff serve up narrative epics that pinpoint, in the tradition of Studs Terkel, the unusual and poetic in the everyday. The Show has been distributed by PRI since 1996.

This American Life has won the highest honors for broadcasting and journalistic excellence: the Peabody and duPont-Columbia awards. *The American Journalism Review* has declared that the show is "at the vanguard of a journalistic revolution." In 2001, *Time* magazine named Glass "Best Radio Host in America."

Intro from Jay Allison

Transom welcomes Ira Glass, the Pied Piper of public radio (the getting people to travel with him part, not the drowning rats and disappearing children part).

Ira is a radio hero because of the way he listens, and the way his listening summons stories you remember. He is a champion for the Many Voices that public radio's mission says it values. *This American Life* is not the voice of record, but a record of the voices around us. The stories are as fully strange and hopeful and funny and harsh and romantic as America itself...and occasionally all at the same time. They sprawl outside the usual standard-issue broadcast confines, telling about the way it actually was, what it felt like, what really happened. Ira is their shepherd, their piper.

But it was not always that way. Ira's Transom Manifesto, which will appear in serialized form over the course of his time with us, begins with his utter lack of talent at this work. We think Ira's failures will give you hope.

Ira Glass's Manifesto, Part One

Rather than talk about radio in a Big Picture way, I'm going to start with some simple things that might be useful to the radio beginners who come to Transom. I'm going to try to avoid repeating things I've said elsewhere about making radio stories, but I'm guessing some repetition is going to be inevitable. Elsewhere on the web you can find an old (and deeply edited) speech about making radio more fun [here](#). There are some pages from the *This American Life* "How to Make Radio" comic book [here](#).



1. Learning Curve

I started working at NPR's headquarters in Washington when I was 19 but I wasn't competent at writing and structuring my own stories until I was 27. I've never met anyone who took longer, and I've met hundreds of people who work in radio. Back then, I made my living by filling in as a production assistant on the various national news shows, and by taking day jobs as a temp typist around Washington. I was sort of hopeless at all the basic tasks of recognizing and shaping a story.

If this sounds like exaggeration, here's a typical report from when I was in my mid-20's. If you listen to the first minute you'll get the idea. The writing's stilted. I'm a horrible reader,

underlining every other word for emphasis. The people in the story are two-dimensional props, used to make an argument. It's hard to even tell what this story's about. I refer to things that no one's ever heard of (like "the international debate over meat and grain production") as if we all have heard of them. The tone of the thing is all wrong. There's no pleasure, no sense of discovery, no humor, no genuine human moment, no fun.



Listen to the Supermarket Excerpt in MP3 - 1:03 (764 kb)

http://www.transom.org/sounds/2004/guests/200405_glass/supermarket_excerpt.mp3

A few years ago, one of the producers of *This American Life*, Alix Spiegel, had an idea for a story about chickens and I remembered that I'd done a story on a similar subject as part of this supermarket series. I dug up a tape. She listened. "There's nothing in here," she reported to me, "showing any talent at all. There's nothing in here that indicates that you were *ever* going to get it." (For a sense of what my aesthetics were like when I was 19 and first worked at NPR, here are two radio spots I did back in college, a month or two before I first set foot in the building. These are possibly the most embarrassing things I could possibly post on the Internet. I was a very corny wannabe humorist. I appear in both spots.) In retrospect, I'm not exactly sure what kept me going. Part of it, I'm sure, was that I didn't have any other prospects. I certainly didn't have any other skills.



Listen to the WNUR Spot #1 - :49 (580 kb)

http://www.transom.org/sounds/2004/guests/200405_glass/wnur_spot1.mp3



Listen to the WNUR Spot #2 - 1:03 (400 kb)

http://www.transom.org/sounds/2004/guests/200405_glass/wnur_spot2.mp3

I bring all of this up to say that if you're someone who wants to make radio stories (or do any kind of creative work), you're probably going to have a period when things might not come too easily. For some people, that's just a year. For others, like me, it's eight years. You might feel completely alone and lost during this period -- God knows I did -- and I hope it's reassuring in some small way to hear that what you're going through is completely normal. Most people go through it. And there are things you can do during this period of mediocrity that will get you to the next step, that will drive you toward skill and competence.



Here's me and my boss, radio producer Keith Talbot, who was on staff at NPR to invent new ways to do an hour documentary show, in one of the original NPR studios on M Street in Washington. I was probably 20, and his production assistant. At the time, that sweater was in fashion, I swear. 1979 I'm guessing.

Force yourself to do a lot of stories. This is the most important thing you can do. Get yourself in a situation where people are expecting work out of you, or where you simply force yourself to do a certain number of stories every month. Turn the stuff out. Deadlines are your friend.

Create your own projects. Some of these can be based on what you're good at. I was always a very good tape cutter. It was the one part of making radio that I got right from the start and did well. I was an okay interviewer and, as we've established, a horrible reader and writer. So I invented this series of stories where I'd interview people and then edit myself out of the tape completely. They'd tell stories and reflect on what the stories meant. No script. No narration.

Here are two of those stories, done several years after the supermarket stories. You can hear something in their tone that would eventually morph into *This American Life*.



Listen to Bradley - 5:27 (3.7 mb)

http://www.transom.org/sounds/2004/guests/200405_glass/bradley.mp3



Listen to Yasuko - 5:29 (3.7 mb)

http://www.transom.org/sounds/2004/guests/200405_glass/yasuko.mp3

Half the people I'd interviewed for this series didn't work out. Their stories weren't interesting enough. That was something else I learned through this series, that lots of things will never be radio stories.

Have your own agenda. By the time I was in my 30's, I was getting reporting assignments from NPR and on any given story, in addition to whatever my editor wanted, I had my own goals. For instance, every story, even the stories thrown together in one day, had to have a tape-to-tape transition. (That is, the story would go from one quote directly to the next ... or from a quote to location sound, to another quote, with no narration. This was to keep me alert to pacing. Too many radio stories just go back and forth from script to tape to script to tape.) Every story had to have some moment that was there to amuse *me* -- a funny moment, an emotional moment, some original observation I'd made on the scene that no other reporter had. It could just be a nice moment in the script. Every story had to have someone who was more than a talking head, spouting out their point of view on the issue of the day. To make them more human, it sometimes only took a line of description, an original thought about who they were and why they believed what they believed, a surprising moment, a funny moment on tape.

What I'm saying is, there was lots I was bad at and I consciously set out to make myself better. For a while, I forced myself in every story to have some moment where I interacted with someone on tape during the story. I did this because I'd noticed that in other people's stories, usually the most interesting stuff came when they talked to the people in the stories, where there was a back and forth. Like most beginning radio reporters, I didn't like to hear myself on tape. I didn't like how I sounded asking the questions. So much of the time I was awkward or cloying. Trying too hard in one way or another. It was embarrassing. But at some point I decided that omitting this kind of tape meant I was accidentally omitting a kind of drama from my stories, neglecting some of the tools at my disposal, neglecting part of the power and fun of the medium, and I forced myself through it, in story after story.

Even today, if I had to give just one piece of advice to beginning reporters about the single fastest way they could improve their stories, it'd be to get themselves into the quotes. Asking tough questions. Cajoling the interviewee. Joking with the interviewee. Thinking out loud and chatting with the interviewee. The daily reporting on public radio would be so much more fun to listen to, and so much more informative about the character of the interviewees, if there were more of this.

Imitate others. Painters do it. Why don't we?

Back when I really didn't understand how to write a radio story, one thing that helped a lot was to mimic other people's writing. I specifically remember stealing this one move I'd heard Alex Chadwick make in a story. It's a good move and I encourage you to steal it too.

To understand the move, put yourself in Alex's position for a second. He's writing the intro to a story about frogs. That story: A high school girl refused to dissect a frog in class. She thought it was inhumane to kill the frog. A judge ruled that she still had to do the assignment, but the school had to provide her with a frog that died of natural causes. I was working at *All Things Considered* and saw this item in the paper and thought it was pretty funny, that some school administrators were now going to have to find frogs who were just on the verge of dying, or just recently dead, and so I produced a little story with Alex about it. We went out with a naturalist to a swamp where frogs live, to look for some recently-dead or dying frogs, to illustrate the new hell this school science teacher would now find himself in.

So okay, you're Alex Chadwick. You have to write the opening of this story. Most of us would be kind of, I don't know, workaday and boring about it. We'd write something summarizing the court case, maybe along the lines of what I just wrote above:

Earlier this week in Victorville California, a high school girl refused to dissect a frog in class. She thought it was inhumane to kill the frog. She ended up in court, where a judge came to this Solomonic ruling: she still had to do the assignment ... but the school had to provide her with a frog that died ... of natural causes. But does such a thing even exist? We decided to figure it out.

Okay, that's lame, I know. But I'm making a point. Listen to Alex's version of the opening. I remember when he showed me the script, I was stunned at how long it was. I figured he'd knock it off in three or four sentences, but he was taking *so much time*. (And needless to say, because we were on *All Things Considered*, we needed things to be short.) I thought he was nuts. But what he did was so much more engaging than what most radio writers do, because, for one thing, it actually has a human voice to it. He sounds like a real guy telling you something he's interested in, not a news-robot.



Listen to the Frog Intro - 1:03 (1.2 mb)

http://www.transom.org/sounds/2004/guests/200405_glass/frog.mp3

In addition, he makes that move, the one that you're going to steal. It comes here: "It bothered her that any creature should have to die so she could cut it open for study. It was a matter of principle. And as with many such issues, it wound up in court." I know it seems like a small thing, but that's the move. Namely, when he says "as with many such issues," he steps out of the facts of this particular story and toward a big general point about How Things Work. Also, framing it as a matter of principle makes it seem bigger and grander and more like a story with something happening in it. This is so much a part of the style of the radio show I work on now that if I open my script for last week's show, I come to an example of it immediately, in the intro to Act One:

And now ... the story of a man with a simple mission: to give a little special treatment to a group of people whose contribution to society is often overlooked: the men and women of the food service industry.

Not the greatest piece of writing, but a decent one. Thanks, Alex.

More to come...

A Conversation w/ Ira Glass

Jackson - 09:08am May 14, 2004 EST (#3 of 146)

Humoring ourselves, maybe humoring others?

Ira: Part 1 of the manifesto is sooooooo good I am going to go through it again. It's impossible to bounce back on everything you raise -- questions of structure, timing, storytelling, etc. -- so I'll start with the problem of humor.

Just because I find something funny, that doesn't mean you're going to laugh at it. And actually, this can apply to anything that appeals to us and our sensibilities -- it's our sense of "taste" but on a grand scale.

Which leads me to the "there must be a pony around here someplace" question: do you think there is such a thing as the "objectively humorous"? Or "inherently curious"? Or

"universally inspiring"? All it takes is writing and good splices to bring the laugh to everyone's lips?

cordleycoit - 05:24pm May 14, 2004 EST (#4 of 146)

I learn

When I first hear your show I thought how wonderful self absorbed White kids talking about their home on the mall.

Then I heard the KS show and remembered and heard myself. Later still the Afghan show made me a listener and a student thank you for stumbling though the NPR blood brain barrier. Well done. Cordley Coit

Viki Merrick - 11:47pm May 14, 2004 EST (#5 of 146)

NEVER SAY DIE

yes...those WUNR spots - filled me with courage, and admiration and a little bit of horror.

Ira Glass - 09:46am May 15, 2004 EST (#6 of 146)

Hi there guys ...

do you think there is such a thing as the "objectively humorous"? Or "inherently curious"? Or "universally inspiring"?

No I don't. The best you can do is put in what's funny or interesting or inspiring to you and then hope for the best. If an editor or a friend agrees with you, that's probably as good as you need.

Wait, who are you in that second WNUR spot?

I'm the guy who says "Are we on tv?" I must've had a cold.

Self absorbed White kids talking about their home on the mall.

This would've been a much better title than *This American Life*. What's the KS show?

P.W. Fenton - 11:59am May 15, 2004 EST (#7 of 146)

This American Guy

Mr. Glass,

In keeping with current ethical trends I'd like to announce that I have been awarded an unprecedented 5 "Golden Communicator Awards" for my radio stories. Details are easily available at <http://digitalflotsam.org>

By the way... you look younger in your comic book.

Ira Glass - 01:53pm May 15, 2004 EST (#8 of 146)

Well, I **was** younger when we did the comic.

laura b - 09:06pm May 15, 2004 EST (#9 of 146)

the hills are alive!

howdy, ira. in other interviews, you've likened music to the basil of radio: everything is better with is added. are there times when you wouldn't use music in a piece? music is pretty potent stuff--do you ever worry that it tugs at emotions and defines how we listeners feel about a piece more than the words? is that a bad thing?

chelsea merz - 10:36am May 16, 2004 EST (#10 of 146)

Bad radio or parody?

The supermarket piece wasn't bad radio. It was great parody. This piece was straight up NPR: The Sorghum, fewer tortillas for the poor, delivered in perfect iambic cadence. I still hear this on NPR news reports every day. Why?

Jackson - 01:06pm May 16, 2004 EST (#11 of 146)

Ira is featured IN PRINT

Boston Globe, 5/16/04,

The semio-grads

[http://www.boston.com/dailyglobe2/137/focus/The semio_grads+.shtml](http://www.boston.com/dailyglobe2/137/focus/The_semio_grads+.shtml)

Did the curious circumstances surrounding Roland Barthes' death influence your manner of reading the world around you?

Ira Glass - 08:41pm May 16, 2004 EST (#12 of 146)

You mean was I more careful crossing the street? Absolutely!

Jackson - 09:14pm May 16, 2004 EST (#13 of 146)

So...

You don't look at laundry trucks differently?

Adam Allington - 10:02pm May 16, 2004 EST (#14 of 146)

That Human Moment

The thing I often find most difficult in my stories (along with the writing and hearing my own rambling questions on tape) is coaxing out that "human" moment from the subject.

For instance I might pursue stories that on the surface seems full of humanity. "Man visits normandy beach-head where his father was killed in '44". "79-year-old cowgirl remembers life in the rodeo".

Seemingly lush and vibrant stories...yet, the potential for things to fall flat is still there. I can ask the six thousand dollar question and they may just shrug their shoulders. Do you have any suggestions for helping me help subjects come to the moment of revelation/reflection on tape.

-thanks

Ira Glass - 11:07pm May 16, 2004 EST (#15 of 146)

I still hear this on NPR news reports every day.

Chelsea! Be nice to the nice radio journalists! Yes, plenty of stories are mediocre on public radio in exactly that earnest pleading way, but it's rare for a story to be quite so poorly written and ill-conceived and showing such bad judgment. I was *special!*

are there times when you wouldn't use music in a piece? ... do you ever worry that it tugs at emotions and defines how we listeners feel about a piece more than the words?

We've actually been experimenting with using less music on the radio show lately. Some of the producers - Alex especially - are tired of how it feels. I think we used to use so much music because we were worried if the stories were holding the audience (and to make up for mediocre readings by non-radio reporters) ... and one reason we use less lately is that we're all feeling more confident that the stories are strong enough without the music.

As for worrying about whether it tugs at emotions ... I don't worry about that at all. We always try to avoid using the sappy music under the sappy moment - it's easy for that to get really corny. (The same is true for how you perform the big emotional moment in a script. I remember one of the old *All Things Considered* hosts, Noah Adams, explaining that's when you have to go for flatter readings; if you get all emotional with emotional material, it can sound cheesy really fast.)

Generally the kind of music we use is more emotionally neutral. Its goal is more to keep a sense of motion, to keep things moving. And to underline the turns in feelings. I'm not against manipulating feelings. The whole job is about manipulating feelings. If you don't get in front of that and embrace it with a big bear hug, you're not doing your job as a radio producer. You just don't want to be all corny about it.

I think people when they start in journalism are understandably sort of shy about seeing their role as anything other than information gatherer. They've seen all those movies and tv dramas about the heroic importance of objectivity for journalists. ("*I'm sorry Senator, but I only serve one master and it's called The Truth. And I'm sorry doll, I love you, I do, but there's only one thing in this world that's more important to me than you, and that's getting the story right. And if I ever changed that about myself, even for you sweetheart, than I wouldn't be the man you fell in love with in the first place, would I?*") But telling a story is also about entertainment. All the decisions about how to structure the information for the listener basically throw you into show business and the manipulating of feelings, like it or not. It's really one of the most fun parts of the job.

Jackson - 12:04am May 17, 2004 EST (#16 of 146)

News not equals fun

Just to follow up on Chelsea's point about the NPR news stories: Nobody's having much fun out there right now, few of the little flips of imagination that transform a standard narrative into this vortex that will not release until the story ends.

Not to be confused with the now-proverbial "driveway moments" -- yes, I know that manipulation is a part of storytelling (why listen otherwise?). But hey! I live in the city; I don't have a driveway. To me, driveway = suburbs. "Moments" reads like a tear-away from a romance novel. And not a bodice-ripper, either.

To put it another way: these cherished driveway moments, they're not much fun either.

Ira Glass - 12:04am May 17, 2004 EST (#17 of 146)

I can ask the six thousand dollar question and they may just shrug their shoulders.

Dude, it's public radio. Nobody's gonna pay you \$6,000.

Adam I hope you don't take this wrong and I'm your colleague here saying this to you but you're using the word 'humanity' in a really weird way. Also the idea of the 'human moment.' I think there's a kind of melodramatic, nostalgic, sappy story you've seen on tv or heard on radio and that's what you're shooting for, thinking that sort of melodrama is the so-called 'humanity' of the story.

Let's review your story examples: *Man visits normandy beach-head where his father was killed in '44.* That story might work, but only if the guy's a great talker, and has a special relationship with this bit of personal history. Chances are, he might not. Or everything he'll say will be exactly what you'd expect from a guy in this situation. If it's not surprising, it's not a story. As far as I'm concerned, the only way it could be a story is if the guy had some burning question he was going to the beach with, some question that could only be answered by being there. I can't imagine what such a question could be.

79-year-old cowgirl remembers life in the rodeo. This also doesn't show much promise, and for the same reason: it doesn't include a whiff of conflict. Without real conflict, there's no story. Now if the story were about a 79-year old woman who'd first worked as a cowgirl, and then, after a lifetime of being treated badly because she was a girl, ended up buying

the rodeo and being the boss of all the people who made her miserable, and if she were entertaining and funny and remembered lots of specific moments at the turning points in the story ... well, then you might have something. But some nice old lady with an accent rambling on about the Olde Days ... that's not a story. What's the interesting part?

Both Bradley and Yasuko (in the clips we've posted) are full of what I'd consider human moments from top to bottom, and they're that way because they're people talking about events which happened to them that meant something important to them, and changed their point of view. Also - and just as important - the stories are surprising. Both of your stories seem too, I dunno, previously handled, to yield much human interest.

In the end, it doesn't come down to asking the one big \$6,000 question. It's more like you have to imagine what it would be like to be in your interviewee's position, to have had their experiences, and you get them to elaborate on that. That's all. And you ask stuff you're curious about, that's important too.

I've talked about this before in other settings, but I really loved this one question I heard Terry Gross ask the magician Ricky Jay, who does whole stage shows of card tricks. "Is the stuff happening that we don't see -- the backstage stuff of a card trick -- ever more interesting than the stuff we do see?" She asked. "And are you ever tempted to show that part, because what's going on is so cool? " What I loved was how deeply she was imagining what it must be like to be him. And she got a great answer from it. It was a revealing moment. That's all you have to do. Imagine your way through your interviewee's experience and what might be interesting about it.

roman - 03:59am May 17, 2004 EST (#18 of 146)

interviews

Do you remember the first question you asked during an interview that made you feel like you were actually becoming a good interviewer? I'm not that adept yet, but I do have a distinct moment where I first saw my potential.

Thanks so much for passing on the Noah Adams "go to" interview question. (to paraphrase: "What did you expect before this happened, and what was it really like?") That one's saved my bacon lots of times. You'll be happy to know that it still yields some good tape.

Joe Richman - 06:37am May 17, 2004 EST (#19 of 146)

Journalism Noir

I think these words from Ira should keep reappearing throughout the discussion, like a chorus. So as a service to the Transom community.... I paste:

"I'm sorry Senator, but I only serve one master and it's called The Truth. And I'm sorry doll, I love you, I do, but there's only one thing in this world that's more important to me than you, and that's getting the story right. And if I ever changed that about myself, even for you sweetheart, than I wouldn't be the man you fell in love with in the first place, would I?"

Ira Glass - 09:55am May 17, 2004 EST (#20 of 146)

These words from Ira? Joe, that's what's printed on the back of the Peabody Award.

Joshua Kilpatrick - 01:50pm May 17, 2004 EST (#21 of 146)

Lot's of things will never be radio stories

Thank you, Ira, for taking the time to participate in this forum. I'm twenty-seven, and have recently awakened to the fact that I love radio and a part of me wants to try to do it. I started my quest three months ago. I was lucky to stumble onto Transom.org early in the process. I feel so lucky that the site is doing well and that professionals like you are collaborating with it. Seriously... thank you. This is invaluable.

You mentioned a revelation that came to you during the "no narrator" NPR series (Yasuko and Bradley). "Lot's of things will never be radio stories." Can you tell us why? Did you mean that some interviewees just can't tell their stories in an interesting enough way or that some stories are just intrinsically not radio material? Whichever, can you write more about that or speculate on some determining factors? Can you describe some of the stories you captured but did not include in the series?

Unrelated to your first installment, I'm wondering if the basic concept of This American Life will survive or if there's fear that it might run its course - much like a sitcom? I hope this won't be the case, but I believe I've noticed the stories and themes becoming more complex - harder to follow. Is it getting harder to produce the show?

Since I'm looking for ways to learn more about radio, I was interested in TAL's internship and in submitting work for consideration. As part of this, I read the submission guidelines

and Hillary Frank's essay, "How to get on This American Life". Hillary mentioned that many of the submissions you receive don't fall in the set of things TAL would consider. Is there something about this format that's just particularly difficult for people to "get"? When you talk to listeners or other radio people about the show, do you feel like people are "getting it"? I recently volunteered at my public radio station for a dreaded pledge drive. It was nerdy but extremely fun (I wish I had brought my microphone). We were giving away tickets to one of your speaking engagements here in Dallas, and as I listened to one of the station personnel and some of my fellow workers trying to explain TAL, I chuckled inside. I didn't feel like they understood. Maybe I was just being snobby.

Joshua, Dallas

Sean Cole - 07:18pm May 17, 2004 EST (#22 of 146)

Regression

Was there ever a time, after you finally felt capable of putting a decent story together, that you just suddenly kind of forgot how to do it? Like you get the tape and log it all and then you're pulling cuts and you're like, "wait, how do I do this again? did I EVER know how to do this? have I EVER put a good story together?!" And then you start banging your head against the desk and smoking and cursing and saying to yourself "you know what I bet there really are painless methods of suicide?" Or is it just me.

paul tough - 07:18pm May 17, 2004 EST (#23 of 146)

Who you calling mediocre?

Ira, you wrote,

I think we used to use so much music because we were worried if the stories were holding the audience (and to make up for mediocre readings by non-radio reporters)

Now, I don't want to get all defensive here, but I thought you *preferred* the non-radio-reporter voice?

Also, what do you think a Nina Totenberg Supreme-Court story would sound like with a Beastie Boys track underneath it? Seriously: could scoring work with straight-up reporting? (Not to say that Ms. Totenberg's reporting is straight-up. You know what I mean.)

Amiller - 07:30pm May 17, 2004 EST (#24 of 146)

Story Telling for Business?

Ira, I was reminded of your live show on narrative structure of the TAL stories when I saw an article in all places, Harvard Business Review on the Telling Tales by Stephen Denning.... I think you might find it interesting.... he tries to break it down into a quite mechanical "story telling catalog" versus your focus on the passion and surprise. The context is on using stories to reach management goals.... who'd a thunk that!

Ira Glass - 11:49pm May 17, 2004 EST (#25 of 146)

Do you remember the first question you asked during an interview that made you feel like you were actually becoming a good interviewer?

I'm afraid I don't, Roman. Though that's a good example of the kind of perfectly good interview question that usually leads nowhere, but if it hits an answer, it gets a really good one, a full narrative with a moral to the story and everything.

"Lots of things will never be radio stories." Can you tell us why?

Actually, Joshua, that's what Parts 2 & 3 of the manifesto, which will roll out later in the week I think, are all about. It's kind of what you expect: some interviewees don't tell the stories well, and some stories intrinsically aren't going to work. There are some basic structural problems that anyone can detect, once you know to look for them. More on this in a few days.

I'm wondering if the basic concept of This American Life will survive or if there's fear that it might run its course - much like a sitcom?

I wondered this a lot a few years ago. Were we more like *Seinfeld* or more like *Fresh Air*? Now I think we're more like *Fresh Air*. We don't seem to run out of story ideas. Maybe I'll feel differently about this in a few years, but that's how it seems now.

I believe I've noticed the stories and themes becoming more complex - harder to follow. Is it getting harder to produce the show?

It doesn't get harder to produce the show, but it doesn't get easier either. As everyone on the show has gotten more skillful, and as we've gotten more money to spend on reporting and travel, we just try harder things.

The fact that some stories seem "harder to follow" to you is a testament to the fact that maybe we're not as successful as we'd like to be with that.

Ira Glass - 12:16am May 18, 2004 EST (#26 of 146)

Was there ever a time, after you finally felt capable of putting a decent story together, that you just suddenly kind of forgot how to do it?

Not in the last few years. But now and then I sit down to write some story for the show and I've got all the logs and it's not clear at all where to start and all the possible beginnings seem equally good (or maybe all the tape seems equally mediocre with no shiny moment standing out as the anchor I'm going to write the whole thing around) and I feel that edgy panic start to rise in my gut. If you don't get that feeling at least once every two months, you're not trying things that are hard enough for you. Last time that happened to me in a big way was our Marriage show, the Gottman story, March 26th. Which means I'm due again in the next nine days. That story was weirdly complicated to report and to make work on the air.

All you can do is have a standard set of procedures that you do for every story, and just force yourself to march through them, one after another. For me the drill goes like this: listen to the tape and go through the log looking for clips; list the possible clips of tape in tiny print on one piece of paper, with asterisks besides the ones that seem the strongest; stare at that list until it's clear which one is the one that'll either start the thing, or the one the whole thing is leading toward. Then I write to the first clip, cut the first clip, figure out the second clip, write to it, cut it, and on and on. I can stall out at any point in there and feel hopeless and while I'm on the subject what in God's name did we all do before email and the Internet when we got to that point where we needed to stall for a minute? Were we all snacking?

I hope this isn't too banal to be posting here. I guess I'm just saying you have to have your regular procedures every time. My calculus teacher in high school Mr Quinn used to say that's the only way to solve a tough math problem too.

Ira Glass - 12:38am May 18, 2004 EST (#27 of 146)

*Now, I don't want to get all defensive here, but I thought you *preferred* the non-radio-reporter voice?*

Now now, I wasn't talking about you, Paul honey. You're a very nice reader. As is each and every person who visits this discussion board.

I do prefer the non-radio-reporter voice, but for most people, reading on the mic is a very strange and not terribly easy proposition. You're in a completely soundproof room. You're reading sort of to an audience but really just to a tape, which is hard to get psyched up for. It's fantastically easy to over-perform, since the entire medium of radio is like a movie camera that's always in closeup. You're hearing your voice played back to you in headphones and for the first, oh, five hundred times you do that, it doesn't sound like your own voice to you, which is completely disorienting.

It all goes down a little easier with some music underneath.

Also, what do you think a Nina Totenberg Supreme-Court story would sound like with a Beastie Boys track underneath it?

It'd sound good! She's a fantastic reader, that Nina Totenberg, and a great radio writer. Her stories are usually these perfect, completely satisfying narratives (with experts plugged in at key moments). Back before they allowed recordings in the Supreme Court, she'd even perform the parts of all the Justices herself, and did it in the most non-cringeworthy way possible. Because of all this, her stories would absolutely work with music. They're usually rather cinematic. She's just great.

Anaheed Alani - 12:47am May 18, 2004 EST (#28 of 146)

Dear Mr. Glass,

I enjoy your program.

Is there anyone you've had sex with that your girlfriend doesn't know about?

Sincerely,
A listener

Ira Glass - 12:50am May 18, 2004 EST (#29 of 146)

Very clever "Anaheed Alani" ... a.k.a. MY GIRLFRIEND.

The answer's yes. Your momma.

Ira Glass - 12:52am May 18, 2004 EST (#30 of 146)

I saw an article in all places, Harvard Business Review on the Telling Tales by Stephen Denning

Thanks for the tip, amiller.

paul tough - 10:32am May 18, 2004 EST (#31 of 146)

while I'm on the subject what in God's name did we all do before email and the Internet when we got to that point where we needed to stall for a minute? Were we all snacking?

No, we were smoking. Unfiltered Pall Malls, to be precise.

Vera - 11:01am May 18, 2004 EST (#32 of 146)

Who do you listen to?

Dear Mr.Glass,

I've recently started an internship with the documentary unit of my local radio station. My first day, nervous and overeager, I asked the show's host "Whose stories get you excited? When you aren't making radio, who do you listen to?" He replied that he doesn't listen to anyone else's stories. "These days, radio is crap. Truthfully, I prefer listening to my own work."

From fantasy to reality or, the first day of an unpaid internship. It occurs to you that while a reporter may be skilled at collecting tape of Afghani orphans playing in war-torn streets, he may not be the most helpful mentor. It makes you wonder if behind every gentle, thoughtful voice in radio is an insolent prima-donna. But I digress.

Mr.Glass, who do you listen to? You're clearly a fan of Nina Totenberg and Terry Gross but where to you go to hear a good story when you aren't making good stories yourself?

Sean Cole - 11:51am May 18, 2004 EST (#33 of 146)

No, we were smoking. Unfiltered Pall Malls, to be precise.

In fact we still are. But we've switched to Old Gold filter kings. However, since many tobacco retailers don't carry those we often settle for Camel filters. Hard pack.

Andy Knight - 01:03pm May 18, 2004 EST (#34 of 146)

Back to part 1 of the manifesto:

For a sense of what my aesthetics were like when I was 19 and first worked at NPR, here are two radio spots I did back in college, a month or two before I first set foot in the building. These are possibly the most embarrassing things I could possibly post on the Internet

What struck me about this is that this isn't the first time you've placed these two spots for WNUR on the web. In fact, you made them into a sort of reward for decoding their filenames back during the secret pages/decoder contest (as was the pickleheimer clip). Are you secretly proud of these spots? Do they evoke some sort of nostalgia for the days before you were "Ira Glass - Host of public radio's *This American Life*"? ...for the days before you became a static personality and could do things like the "Daddy, I'm going crackers" without receiving calls from colleagues worried about your mental health.

On a different note, what happened to Fall Clearance, Poultry Slam and pledge drives that were more than just "best of" clip shows? Sure, you've said before that Poultry Slam died because there just aren't that many stories about chickens, but, c'mon, *The Vagina Monologues* has been running since 1998, and a chicken is, like, 20 times bigger than a vagina. Certainly the stories are out there just waiting for you to [avoiding pun] them.

Cameron Stallones - 05:55pm May 18, 2004 EST (#35 of 146)

So...

You don't look at laundry trucks differently?

I thought it was an ice cream truck

Ira: i just wanted to say thanks, you shook my hand at the UCLA event with Chris Ware, and were very pleasant. I enjoy your show, and look forward to each new episode, but I have to ask: you clearly define your methodology as a formula, in a sense, to the extent of

having a fixed "narrative structure" that each TAL story follows and that each submission should follow.

do you ever worry that that formula can become just as "dead" of a medium as the shock jock show, or even the bland NPR tortilla report?

granted, its convenient and necessary to know what works and stick to it, and becoming the Peter Greenaway of the radio world seems at the least destructive to a legacy of wonderful storytelling. but how do you know, I suppose i'm asking, that your format is still communicating, especially when it's still "working" (people seem to react well to it) but perhaps doesnt carry the same weight as before it became a "format?"

Cameron Stallones - 05:57pm May 18, 2004 EST (#36 of 146)

and I just realized after reading that that sounds like a dig at the show, and it most assuredly is not (I adore the show, and it singularly interested me in radio). but as someone who does documentary radi production, its something i struggle with and wonder how you judge

Ira Glass - 10:31pm May 18, 2004 EST (#37 of 146)

What struck me about this is that this isn't the first time you've placed these two spots for WNUR on the web.

Oh, I completely forgot. Well, I found them embarrassing then and I still do.

Are you secretly proud of these spots? Do they evoke some sort of nostalgia for the days before you were "Ira Glass - Host of public radio's This American Life"? ...for the days before you became a static personality

I'm proud of the Bradley story, sure. It still holds up. The promos, no. And I don't actually see myself as "Ira Glass - Host of public radio's This American Life." That would sort of make me a crazy person. If anything, my job doesn't feel that different from day to day than it did when I was working for *All Things Considered*. The struggle of figuring out a story is pretty much the same. And I still feel the utter, perfect freedom to sound dumb on the air; I mean, I *sang* on a recent show, for god's sakes.

On a different note, what happened to Fall Clearance, Poultry Slam and pledge drives that were more than just "best of" clip shows? Sure, you've said before that

Poultry Slam died because there just aren't that many stories about chickens but

...

If you're saying we're recycling material in those shows, sure, but it's only so we have time to devote to making new material for other shows. As for the Poultry Slam show, we slowed down on that annual event only because people on staff felt we'd all exhausted all our feelings about that particular theme. As much as anything else, we choose the themes based on what's intriguing and exciting to us as a staff.

Ira Glass - 11:13pm May 18, 2004 EST (#38 of 146)

Who do you listen to? Where do you go to hear a good story when you aren't making good stories yourself?

I'm a fan of a lot of the people who regulars at Transom already know and love: **Joe Richman**, **David Isay**, **Joe Frank**. I think Michael Feldman is underrated by my snobby documentary producer friends; in fact I'd argue that **Whad'ya Know** is a kind of documentary program, a live one, about midwesterners. That's what makes it work. I just wish the dude would stop making all those jokes about his wife.

I think Robert Krulwich is a kind of genius. Every story of his I ever see, I want to steal every part of it. I feel the same way with pretty much every **Malcolm Gladwell** story. And nearly anything by Michael Lewis. Those three guys have this joyful curiosity that just permeates their reporting. Also, all three are kings at making surprising and original Big Ideas land gracefully in their stories, like one per page or more (one per minute in Krulwich's case).

Oh, but back to radio. I love **On the Media**. I've said this elsewhere but I think it's the best new show on public radio. It proves that in the end, it all comes down to good judgment. They're working in the most tired format in the world (reporter pieces and interviews), they're doing a show about a subject most people - me included - find inherently dull (the media), everything's stacked against them. And yet, every week they find original angles and interesting things to say. They're smart. They're not pious but not snarky either. It feels like what a good radio show should feel like - that they're a group of particular people with particular tastes doing stories that try to describe and understand the world, but through their distinct personalities. That show's a complete pleasure. If you don't have it in your town yet, you're missing out on something special.

I know too many people at NPR to start naming names here, but I always feel jealous of the cleanness of the writing and logic and performance in David Kestenbaum's stories. Also Mike Shuster's. I'm liking those new *Morning Edition* hosts. Tough gig to step into.

There's a new show that Minnesota Public Radio has in pilot form right now called **Pop Vultures** which okay isn't the greatest name but they sent me some CDs and I listened over and over with pleasure in a way that almost never happens. Basically, they're a pop music show on public radio that doesn't treat rap and Britney Spears with that weird condescending tone that the news shows usually take. (Or the game shows: I like that Peter Sagal and all but when he makes his smug little jokes about Britney it's hard not to wince.) What makes *Pop Vultures* work, besides the cheerful we're-just-chatting very non-public-radio tone, is that the woman who hosts the show, Kate Sullivan, says lots of interesting and surprisingly original things about bands you know and bands you only sort of half-know. She sounds young and happy in a way that's completely unusual on public radio.

They have all the episodes on the **Pop Vultures site**. My favorites: Ep 2 (the stuff about Britney and Christina) and Ep 5 (esp the part about Dave Grohl being the secret weapon that made Nirvana a great band - who'd think you could have an original thought about Nirvana at this point? - and, come to think of it, all the various stories about Grohl hitting the drum real hard). Their host is great - nearly sort of religious - talking about the White Stripes, but their worst episode is where she talks about her other favorite band, OutKast, so figure.

Interestingly, WNYC is also piloting a pop music show, this one hosted by John Flansburgh of They Might Be Giants, called **Now Hear This** which I haven't heard yet but I bet will be good. I'd hate to be either John or Kate having to compete with the other.

Having said all that ... for most of my storytelling consumption, like most Americans, I watch tv. I think we're in a big golden age of tv right now, where the networks are losing audience every year so they'll just try any goddamn thing so lots of interesting stuff gets on the air in a way it never has before and might never happen again. Seriously, I think someday people will look back on this period and say what a creative, interesting time it is. Um. Was.

The O.C. is about as perfect and endearing as a tv show will ever get I think. And nearly once a week on *The Daily Show* they do something that I'm sort of stunned to see on tv, it's so good. My girlfriend keeps trying to get me to watch the daily reality show, *Starting Over*, and while she was able to hook me onto *Idol* and *Survivor* and *America's Top Model* ... that show just freaks me out.

Jackson - 11:22pm May 18, 2004 EST (#39 of 146)

Is a story is a story is a story...

to paraphrase Gertrude Stein? Part of the story is how we speak. I wonder about the different voices we use -- say hey! for example, voices that you use: Ira in the supermarket, Ira talking about camps.

I did a news story in the fall, and while I was voicing it, I felt like the breath had been squeezed out of my lungs and I needed to get as many words out in a single breath as I could. That Lost & Found Sound story of the astronauts talking to LBJ immediately leapt to mind. Was I trying to fit the time frame? I'm not sure. I was trying to deliver news.

Is it possible that the role of the commentary in the news mags -- the slower voice, yes-I-come-to-you-from-the-normal-world kind of speaking -- largely is to fit as a matter of audio variation and tempo from standard fare?

Ira Glass - 11:29pm May 18, 2004 EST (#40 of 146)

I dunno Jackson. Could be just that people who wanna do commentaries are just imitating the commentators they already hear on the shows. They figure that's the right way to do it.

Jackson - 11:43pm May 18, 2004 EST (#41 of 146)

What about "genre" fits "function"?

So?

Ira Glass - 11:44pm May 18, 2004 EST (#42 of 146)

Cameron, you asked

Do you ever worry that that formula can become just as "dead"

Sure. That's why it's important to do stories you have strong feelings about. That's the only way around that.

Stephanie S - 07:56pm May 19, 2004 EST (#43 of 146)

"Documentary Unit"?

OK I have one question for Vera, and one for Ira (second paragraph)

I've recently started an internship with the documentary unit of my local radio station.

... what is a "documentary unit" and where is your fabulous radio station located? I'm (unsuccessfully) trying to make a career transition from TV to radio, and so far in my job research I haven't heard of anything like a documentary unit. All I've heard from people I've talked to is "you have no journalism background", blah blah. But I have been producing and doing research on TV docs for several years, so perhaps there is something like your "unit" worth pursuing ?

Last week, I was TURNED DOWN for a \$8/hour internship at Marketplace (working for the commentary editor) while simultaneously getting a rather generous offer for a research gig on a PBS documentary about Native Americans and ecology. This is after being turned down for a PA position on a new MPR pilot (by the way I started doing PA work for TV and film when I was 19, so this was what I already considered "taking it down a notch"). OK -- and this one is for Ira -- is public radio REALLY that hard to get into?!?

Honestly. I want to do good stories, with integrity. I want to submit to TAL. I want to learn to edit audio by getting a PA job. I want to start at the bottom. I guess I will have to learn this on my own, but I still beg the question -- is public radio really this competitive?

Ira Glass - 11:47pm May 19, 2004 EST (#44 of 146)

Is public radio REALLY that hard to get into!?

Okay, it's summer, meaning all the newsy people at NPR will need temporary fill-in for vacationing staffers. Money's decent. I did this work, back in the day. If you have no tape cutting skill you can work as an editorial assistant, meet people, get some nice person to show you how to edit. Um, or learn that here on Transom.

Each show at NPR is run separately so you can call the executive producer or producer of ATC, Morning Edition (that's still Ellen McDonnell I think), Weekend ATC, Weekend Saturday, Weekend Sunday, Talk of the Nation. Somebody's got to need a temp for a few weeks, right?

I'm not too sure but I suspect Minnesota Public Radio's news operation might be big enough to need summer fill-ins. Do the same trick: call each show, call each bureau, call the receptionist and ask which department might need a summer fill-in.

Rule of thumb in public radio is you work somewhere for a year or two for free or for next to nothing while they get to know you and you get some skills. You become indispensable. Then they hire you, usually about ten minutes after you're already too qualified for the job you applied for. It's not a great system but at least it's cheaper than grad school.

Or you just start making stories. That's more or less what David Isay did. One great thing about journalism is that you don't actually need anyone's permission to start on your first story. You can just start. It's handy to have someone with more experience you can turn to with your questions, and fortunately, you can do that at this very website, week after week, month after month.

If you haven't already done this, buy some equipment. If you have middle class parents who you still speak with, this would pretty much be when you call them up and remind them that this is what happens in middle class families: when their kid starts a new business or career, the parents loan some money. I think I still owe my dad some of the \$1800 he gave me to buy my Otari reel-to-reel that was essential to making radio back in the day.

Jackson - 12:01am May 20, 2004 EST (#45 of 146)

Right Ways before TAL

Good luck, Ira. I'm seeing six or seven threads floating around here right now.

I'll try to be succinct (yeah, right): In the dark old days before 1848, the authorities claim form determined content. If you were singing a ballad, you were singing a story of a recent event or something from the immediate past in strophic form. Elements and people in the story were already familiar to your listeners.

On the other hand, if you were conveying a legend, you would be telling a story in prose about someone other than yourself. As if to say: Your listeners probably know this guy too. (none of this is to be confused with the memorat, a tale one tells about oneself in hopes that it will become a legend). (For film buffs, the concept of the memorat was developed by Carl Maria von Sydow, a botanist turned folklorist, who fathered Max of Bergman and "Exorcist" fame.)

In an earlier post, Cameron brought into play the word "formula" -- presumably a shorthand for describing a predetermined structure for storytelling -- and how it relates to the telling of stories on TAL.

Given the prejudice surrounding the word "formula," let me offer in its place "genre."

My sense is that you and your sisters and brothers at TAL have always been very conscious of the "forms" of storytelling -- the Q&A, for example, even while you might sometimes offer an example where there is no Q, only A.

How do the gang at TAL perceive the "formula" and "genre" monikers in storytelling?

Ira Glass - 12:47am May 20, 2004 EST (#46 of 146)

It's interesting what you write about this stuff, Jackson, but you've given this particular corner of things more thought than I have, probably more than anyone on the staff.

I will say, though, that using the word "genre" instead of "formula" certainly makes one feel like less of a hack. That's a very helpful suggestion. Thanks!

Elysia Hansel - 02:29am May 20, 2004 EST (#47 of 146)

music as an intermission

Ira,

Just recently I've been listening to some "This American Life" archives. Have you always used the Act I, Act II, Act III to outline the program? The music in between acts often does the same thing as in theatre - give the audience/listener time to digest the story, discuss possible outcomes of the characters and find out what moments stayed with your friends and why.

Second question, In storytelling the theme comes back again to tie the stories to each other and the characters to the listener, so how do you decide which character to introduce first?

Cameron Stallones - 03:24am May 20, 2004 EST (#48 of 146)

I'll try to be succinct (yeah, right): In the dark old days before 1848, the authorities claim form determined content. If you were singing a ballad, you were singing a story of a recent event or something from the immediate past in strophic form. Elements and people in the story were already familiar to your listeners.

On the other hand, if you were conveying a legend, you would be telling a story in prose about someone other than yourself. As if to say: Your listeners probably know this guy too. (none of this is to be confused with the memorat, a tale one tells about oneself in hopes that it will become a legend). (For film buffs, the concept of the memorat was developed by Carl Maria von Sydow, a botanist turned folklorist, who fathered Max of Bergman and "Exorcist" fame.)

In an earlier post, Cameron brought into play the word "formula" -- presumably a shorthand for describing a predetermined structure for storytelling -- and how it relates to the telling of stories on TAL.

Given the prejudice surrounding the word "formula," let me offer in its place "genre." My sense is that you and your sisters and brothers at TAL have always been very conscious of the "forms" of storytelling -- the Q&A, for example, even while you might sometimes offer an example where there is no Q, only A.

How do the gang at TAL perceive the "formula" and "genre" monikers in storytelling?

I think what this string of thought boils down to, Jackson (and please forgive me if this is getting too off topic), is a debate I've been having with a few friends lately, as we've been attempting to make ourselves "film literate."

It seems in approaching almost any art form, a gross simplification can be made of two major efforts: one to progress at all costs, and a more craft oriented bent. In film, today, you can find those two threads in the aforementioned Peter Greenaway (as the "progress-minded") and perhaps Krystof Kielowski, or in an odd sense, even Tarantino's "Kill Bill's" (using "film language" to communicate in a surprisingly meaningful way) in a more craft oriented strain.

Greenaway's relentless "breaking of barriers, blah blah blah" make him a kind of hard person to stand, since he seems to have a hatred for anything but the most experimental and (over)intellectual theory based film, though it produces, I think, brilliant films. Kielowski is someone who I think we can safely say breaks almost no film-conventions but merely strives to tell a story as well as he can, using the conventions of the medium to his advantage.

So you fall in one camp or the other...usually...valuing only progress, and experimentation (which is a strange thing to see in such a passed over medium as radio), or pure craft (finding what works and sticking to it)...neither seems wrong, and I am usually drawn to the more craft-oriented works, since hard-line progressors usually see their primary good in novelty, not in quality.

though I have to admit progressors are necessary too.

in the fine arts, this has been played out very rapidly over the past hundred or so years (since cezanne, really) where novelty and aesthetic experimentation seem to have been featyured as a primary good, and I think contemporary art is going to enter a more craft oriented period soon.

I suppose the answer is a boring one: find some sort of balance, but i think its unfair to criticize, really, for either bent as long as the work is strong.

and i spose, to follow up on Ira's comment, formulas arent for hacks, they're for Tarantino's, and Kieslowski's...they communicate and communicate well...thats why someone writes them down. and progress for progress's sake tires quickly. I think TAL does a great job of balancing both...

Jackson - 09:32am May 20, 2004 EST (#49 of 146)

balancing act

Cameron, you're right: TAL does a great job of balancing both the quest for progress and the quest for craft. And it has set in motion a group of programs -- OTM, Studio 360, The Next Big Thing -- that in varying degrees address the same quests, though OTM is journalistic in perspective.

Ira is brilliant at providing context for the acts (though Ira, a question: do others contribute to the prose you read on the show? Is it an editorial haggle?), but what's particularly appealing is that what sounds like a conversation -- for example, Squirrel Cop -- is actually an interview where we get all the details. But the Qs are more involved and engaging than, "What's your name?" "What's yer quest?"

Which leads me to a couple of questions -- Ira, is it possible to be too prepared for an interview? And how long was the actual interview with Squirrel Cop before you ended up with the 15:00 or so?

Phil Easley - 09:33am May 20, 2004 EST (#50 of 146)

Ira, you wrote:

I started working at NPR's headquarters in Washington when I was 19 but I wasn't competent at writing and structuring my own stories until I was 27. I've

never met anyone who took longer, and I've met hundreds of people who work in radio.

Why do you suppose it took you so long to learn how to tell a story? And wasn't there SOMETHING from those first eight years that you were doing right, that you're still doing?

paul tough - 06:40pm May 20, 2004 EST (#51 of 146)

Ira, thanks for the tip to check out Pop Vultures:

<http://popvultures.publicradio.org/>

What a great-sounding show. It feels like a true descendant of TAL, mostly because it sounds absolutely nothing like TAL, the way TAL sounded nothing like what came before it.

Jay, when can we get Kate Sullivan as a Transom guest?

And Ira, what chance do you think I have of ever hearing this on WNYC?

Jay Allison - 07:24pm May 20, 2004 EST (#52 of 146)

vultures

We have already aired all the episodes on our **stations on the Cape and Islands**. It is available **on the PRX** for any station in the country that wants it, WNYC included. Kate & Co. as Transom Guests is a good idea.

Here's my review from the PRX:

Review of Pop Vultures Introduction by Jay Allison:

At our public radio station we like Pop Vultures, even though it doesn't sound like anything else on our air. Okay... BECAUSE it doesn't sound like anything else. It's clever and lively, occasionally callow, but so what? We're going to air all of it. The music beds are perfectly mixed, with lots of treats of timing, wanting only a little higher music-to-talk ratio once in a while, just so we could understand better what all the talk is about. The talk is both earnest and hip, full of love for the subject. If you're older you're bound to miss some of the cultural references, but you'll understand the nature of the discussion, and the heart and thought behind it. Sometimes it'll make you feel smart, sometimes stupid. Our audience, and our community (Cape Cod and the Islands), has a lot of older people in it, but they're not

DEAD, so we assume they are interested generally in life, not to mention the lives of their children and grandchildren. At least we hope so and we're going to program under that assumption until we learn different.

Ira Glass - 07:58pm May 20, 2004 EST (#53 of 146)

It feels like a true descendant of TAL, mostly because it sounds absolutely nothing like TAL, the way TAL sounded nothing like what came before it.

Yeah exactly. That's one of the things I love about it too.

Nicholas Epstein - 08:13pm May 20, 2004 EST (#54 of 146)

Why I Cry

Dear Ira,

I am an American living in Switzerland, and when we finally got broadband up here in the Alps, I started listening regularly to TAL on the net (whereas in the States, I had only been a casual listener). It seems to fill up this void that comes with living in a faraway place, in a unique and satisfying way. It's not anything patriotic or a longing for home, I just really identify with what you guys think is cool or sad or slightly weird. Moreover I think that this reverence for and need to celebrate the smallness and singularity of each person's brief stint on earth is a distinctly American cultural characteristic.

There is at least one moment during every show where I am overcome with emotion, and the amazing thing is, a lot of times, I'm not exactly sure why. I really have to think about it; sometimes it doesn't even have anything at all to do with me or my own experience. Can you imagine? What a gift it is to actually feel something for no other reason than that someone else somewhere felt something similar, and that it is now just there to be felt, in the ether of humanity.

There is a certain humbling power in looking for the beautiful and wonderful in that which is everyday and small and familiar (and vice versa). Your show always reminds me of that, so, thanks.

Also, people rock.

gasolina - 08:16pm May 20, 2004 EST (#55 of 146)

Hola

Ira,

I was thinking it would be interesting if you did a friendster-esque theme for TAL. People telling stories about others that are a few degrees away. Kind of like otherpeoplestories.com meets friendsters meets dominos. Structured around some type of sad/funny/tragic incident. Would that work? Or is that just Rashomon for radio?

Why exactly does Starting Over freak you out? Is it the tears? Please share more about that.

Jackson - 11:47pm May 20, 2004 EST (#56 of 146)

Just throwing this on the fire...

We really haven't banged our heads against the musical wall in radio in this discussion, but seeing as how music -- any music -- conveys time and place (in other words, history), I offer up Nick Hornby's contemplations upon reaching the age of 47:

<http://nytimes.com/2004/05/21/opinion/21HORN.html?hp>

drewc - 12:56am May 21, 2004 EST (#57 of 146)

Quickie

So, can you go to a movie anymore without hearing the soundtrack and thinking, "wow, this is going to be great behind a radio piece someday?"

Ira Glass - 01:33am May 21, 2004 EST (#58 of 146)

Manifesto Continued....

2. What's a Story?

The people who run Transom had this suggestion:

From all the submissions you get, you must have a sense of Things That Tend NOT To Work... and maybe some ideas for GETTING them to work. For instance, what moves the personal story toward something more? Are there stories that are just not worth pursuing and what do they have in common?

Some stories definitely aren't worth pursuing. These are stories where everything reminds you too much of other stories you've already heard, and stories where there's no sympathetic character (it's hard for the story to carry much feeling if there's no one in the story to relate to), and stories where everything kind of works out as you'd sort of expect. Surprise is important.

And some stories just have a kind of, I don't know the word, charisma or something. There definitely is a X factor, some extra exciting something in certain stories, that when you tell a friend the story, you feel yourself get charged up. It's got some juice in it. Sometimes it's the alchemy of the characters and the situation and the plot turns. Sometimes it's just one moment where someone says something or does something or realizes something that's so perfect and pleasing to think about. Understanding what it is that attracts you to the story in the first place is a big part of making the story work.



One simple way to test whether your story is worth telling on the radio is to tell it to your friends, and notice how you feel. Do you feel like you're dragging through one tedious moment after another, always on the verge of losing their interest, and sometimes you're not even sure what the story's about or why you're telling certain parts? Or are your friends laughing and buying you drinks and begging you for more details about the characters?

When you're done, does everyone at the table launch into an excited discussion of similar things that happened to them? Heed these signs. If you can't tell the story compellingly to a friend, it means either you haven't figured out what the story is really about, or - much more likely - it never will be possible to tell this story compellingly over the radio.

(Also notice, incidentally, the way you tell your friends the story: where you begin it, what background facts you feel compelled to throw in and where you throw them in, what parts of the story you tell in what order, what parts of the story you leave out, what parts of the story seem weaker when you tell them. The way you tell the story to your friends is often the most structure for the story on the radio. Sometimes, when someone's stuck on writing a story for our show, I or one of the other producers will have them put down their notes and logs and just tell us the story, to hear the structure they naturally use in telling it aloud.)

And yes, there are ways to get a story to work. Often this means you have to think about what the heart of the story is about, and figure out how to make that more present. This can involve adding moments and scenes that build up the central conflict (and pruning away the ones that don't). It can mean making explicit what the story means, stating more directly what the point of the whole thing is. More about that below.

Some Basics About Story Construction

I usually think of a radio story (the kind of story we do on *This American Life*, anyway) as having two basic parts to it. There's the plot, where someone goes through some experience. And then there are moments of reflection, where this person (or another character in the story, or the narrator) says something interesting about what's happened. Or, put another way, there's the action of the story and there are the conclusions. And both have to be pretty interesting. A person can walk through lava, cure a disease, find true love, lose true love, discover he was adopted, discover he was NOT adopted, have all manner of amazing experiences, but if he (or the narrator) can't say something big and surprising about what that experience means, if the story doesn't lead to some interesting idea about how the world works, then it doesn't work for radio. Or, anyway, it's not going to be as powerful as the best radio stories. The best radio stories have both. So one way to get an ailing story to work (and to determine if it's a story at all) is to figure out what surprising conclusions about the world might come from that story.

Here's an example of a personal story that reaches for bigger, universal ideas. It's a pretty old story, one I did for *Morning Edition* with a reporter named Margy Rochlin. The pacing and music choices are a little less dynamic than I'd probably go for today. (Years later, we collected this story and a bunch from the same series into the Liars episode of *This American Life*.)



Listen to the Liars Story - 11:03 (15.3 mb)

http://www.transom.org/sounds/2004/guests/200405_glass/liars.mp3

If you listen, you'll hear that this lays out in two clear sections. There's the plotline about the narrator's freshman roommate, and how he told this big lie, and how the lie unfolded, and how it was discovered. Then there's the idea section of the story. If you haven't listened to the story yet, but think you will someday, you might want to **skip down four paragraphs** to avoid some spoilers.

There are three ideas in this story. The first is about life in a small town, and how lonely it is, and how it can lead you to this kind of lie. That's a nice one because it's so anthropological. I love when the narrator says "Have you ever been to a really a small town? If you've ever been to a really small town and you're a different kind of kid ... " I love how he leaps to a big general principle he's noticed, based on his own experience, an experience that's so different from mine.

The second idea made more sense years ago, back when this story was produced, because the Kennedy legend was a little shinier then. Our narrator talks about the power of the Kennedy myth, and how "if you're going to try to embroider a life, a life in America, what myth are you going to try to hook yourself onto?" The soundmix in here - where the second voice comes in - still makes me really happy, every time I hear it. This is the sparkliest of the three ideas, the most original, I think.

The third idea explains how our narrator was complicit in the lie. How he kind of enjoyed the lie. Which is nice because it makes the drama of the story more complicated.

It's best to try to figure out the possible Big Ideas in your story before you go out and start interviewing people, because knowing what the Big Ideas might turn out to be will shape your interviews. Any idea that happens in a radio story, you'll want tape to illustrate. That's as true in this kind of story as in a news report on *Morning Edition*. You'll need tape of your interviewees talking about the Big Ideas.

And yes, lots of times when you get in the field, you discover that either no one in the story has anything interesting to say about what happened, or the facts of the story turn out differently than you thought, or some other damn thing fails to fall into place and your story just dissipates into vapor. Probably half the interviews I do never make it onto the air for this very reason. Some moment in the story is interesting, but there's nothing interesting to say about it.

It's helpful to build into the way you think about stories the notion that lots of ideas aren't going to pan out. Our show's acquisitions budget, even at very beginning when we were still struggling for every dollar, was set up to commission a fourth more stories than we'd ever run, with the assumption we'll be killing lots of ideas.

So How Do You Find the Ideas Inherent in a Story?

Consider this story. It's about this guy, Adam Davidson, whose mom is Israeli and whose dad is American. When he was a teenager, Adam read the biography of David Ben-Gurion, the founder of the state of Israel. Ben-Gurion was a compulsive diarist and in Adam's diary at 16, Adam wrote with the quiet conviction that he, Adam, was destined for a fate like Ben-Gurion's. Someday he would be the Prime Minister of Israel.

Adam's a regular contributor to our show and this whole story was mainly an excuse to read his really funny, cringeworthy teenage diary entries on the air. Here's a sample:



Listen to Adam Clip #1 - 1:03 (1.5 mb)

http://www.transom.org/sounds/2004/guests/200405_glass/adam1.mp3

So interviews for this style of story (and by that I mean most interviews I do for our show) generally take the following form. For a while I get the person to lay out the plot of what happened, getting them to be very specific about the turning points in the story and about any other moments and details that interest and amuse me (including, in this case, reading from diary entries). I comment and I get them to comment on anything intriguing that comes up along the way.

And then there's the part of the interview - really, it can be interspersed throughout the interview too - where I look for the Big Ideas.

So once I had Adam explain the diary and read a bunch of funny excerpts, I started in on the Big Idea part of things, which mostly involves a lot of fishing around, asking every idea-oriented question I can possibly think of.

To come up with these questions, mainly I just imagine the story from Adam's perspective. I try to imagine what it would mean to be that 16-year-old version of Adam, and what the story says about kids like that. The questions can be as direct as: "Why you? Why were you the one kid who thought he'd be prime minister of Israel?" Or one can ask the same thing in a more abstract way, to elicit a more general kind of answer: "What sort of teenager do you think ends up writing a diary like this?"

In the end, out of all the questions I asked, two areas led to interesting thoughts you could say on the radio. One came from these questions about what sort of kid he was. Adam said that he was the sort of awkward kid who never could get a girl to kiss him, and so it was nice when he was 16 to have this space where he was "one of the greats."



Listen to Adam Clip #2: One of the Greats - :41 (650 kb)

http://www.transom.org/sounds/2004/guests/200405_glass/adam2_greats.mp3

But the really beautiful and original and surprising part of the interview came by accident, out of a question that was actually kind of a throwaway.



Listen to Adam Clip #3: Mix - 1:33 (2.2 mb)

http://www.transom.org/sounds/2004/guests/200405_glass/adam3_mix.mp3

Honestly, if you've never felt that feeling, that way of looking at your parents, then you were not a teenager in America. It's so big and universal and easy to relate to. This moment takes a funny story and makes it really huge and special. And that's not just because of that sappy music I put under it.

But to get that nice answer on tape - to get so lucky - I had to try dozens of different things during the interview. I threw out all sorts of half-baked questions and speculations and proddings. To give you a sense of just how far-ranging and ill-conceived some of these are, I put together this montage of all the Big Idea questions that went nowhere in that one hour interview. Note that the reason there are lots of questions about cringes is that the theme of the show this was recorded for, was Cringes (though it later ended up in a different show).



Listen to Adam Clip #4: Questions - 1:33 (7.5 mb)

http://www.transom.org/sounds/2004/guests/200405_glass/adam_questions.mp3

In putting this montage together for Transom, I found many of the things I said to be embarrassing. I'm trying so hard. Some of the ideas I throw out there are really too far out. But this, honestly, is typical for me. I don't want to sound dumb on the air, but I'm willing to

sound dumb during an interview. And trying a lot of different ideas of various sorts is the only way I know to get the kind of tape I want.

Coming soon: *Other This American Life Producers Weigh In...*

Joanna - 02:54am May 21, 2004 EST (#59 of 146)

Big idea-dar

Ira,

You're talking in your last post about my favorite aspect of TAL, the contrast between the personal story and big ideas in each piece. When you go about starting a story, do you have the sense that those big ideas are already there or do they usually surprise you? I know that all reporting has an inherent slant or bias but was it hard to learn not to work towards the answers that you wanted to hear?

Again, thanks so much for the postings and discussion. These are the kinds of things I've always wanted to know about radio, TAL, and your methods as a reporter and producer (HmMMM, bargain book title? "Everything you wanted to know about public radio but were afraid to ask").

As a far-flung side note to the discussions of using music in reporting, thanks for the frequent use of Jonathan Richman on TAL. I love to hear his wonderful and ridiculous songs on public radio. It's where he belongs.

Andy Knight - 04:04am May 21, 2004 EST (#60 of 146)

Are these "big ideas" the reason why teenagers are featured so often on the show? They all seem to be so filled with "big ideas" that they come tumbling out of their mouths with no regard to how completely inane and cringeworthy they are. I can relate to the teens spouting them, of course. When I was a teen I was a Republican, so I certainly had as many horrible big ideas, if not more, as the teens who make the show.

On another note, I'm creeped out by that Starting Over show, too. I can't pin down what it is about it that makes my skin crawl. There is the "If I was at my most pathetic, would I want to go on a show that is all about how pathetic I am?" thing, but also, there is some underlying vibe that makes me feel as if I've stumbled into a Southern Baptist bible study session or something, and everyone in it was breastfeeding a farm animal. I could probably watch the show if Mulder and Scully were on site to insure that there wasn't something else hiding in the subtext.

P.W. Fenton - 09:43am May 21, 2004 EST (#61 of 146)

Is this great... or what?

Mr. Glass,

I'm just loving the hell out of this whole thing. There are so many times I will listen to a piece on the radio, and I'll feel like I have an idea of the producer's thinking. Maybe it's something I sense about the producer's feelings that is never stated in the story but that I'd love to have the opportunity to know... Was I right about your thinking? Did you do it this way for this reason? Were you trying to do this? Etc.

This is that opportunity and I really love it. The only thing missing are the beers and the annoying muzak making me strain to hear your half of the conversation. Thank you, Mr. Glass, and than you Transom.

So... a few thoughts. I wonder what you think of the music in the "Liars Story". You used a piece of music that I love and have used many times, but it didn't seem to fit a narrative story well. I think I've always used it under sort of documentary narration, and there it sort of holds up the narration and tells the listener to "listen to this". In the Liars Story I always felt like it was pulling against the mood of the story, fighting for my attention. I'm wondering if you agree, or maybe have another perspective.

The Adam clips made me think about NPR's surprising move of putting Bob Edwards out to pasture. Their stated purpose being to "freshen up" the programming. My own feeling is that as forces in the media get more youthful, the media gets more like the diary of a 16 year old... passionate, but foolish.

While listening to your delightful montage of self-critical out-takes, it made me think of another question. Would you edit your part in an interview to make your self sound better than you were? For instance, let's say you asked a question where you are thinking while you are talking and wind up saying "and... and... and... and...". Would you go ahead and use those old tape editing skills and turn that into a single natural sounding "and"? I know that I would, and have done such cosmetic surgery on myself, but I am aware that there are so many "public radio/independent producer" types that would fret over the "ethics" of such editing. I think the goal of the piece is foremost, and that any editing that brings the desired response from the listener is "kosher" as long as it doesn't alter the bigger truth. In other words, to me, making the interviewer, or the interviewee communicate more effectively has nothing to do with the integrity of the overall piece. Where do you set the limits of what you would manipulate and what you wouldn't?

Again... I am just so thrilled to have this kind of opportunity to chat with someone we all feel like we know, but who is normally so inaccessible.

P.W. Fenton - 09:55am May 21, 2004 EST (#62 of 146)

Editing

Would I go back and add the missing "k" to "than you Transom"? Would I go back and make "your self" into one word?

I certainly would.

The bigger question is... isn't it better to have someone else proof your work?

Aaron - 01:26pm May 21, 2004 EST (#63 of 146)

Obligatory equipment question

Ira,

What do you use for field recording? I have a crappy minidisc player, but they are rapidly being phased out. Have you switched to MP3 recorders?

Hey Paul,

Are you an In These Times reader, love the Vonnegut reference!

Tony Kahn - 02:06pm May 21, 2004 EST (#64 of 146)

SO, IS THERE A STORY RENAISSANCE OR WHAT?

Ira, I just returned from a function for KCLW in Salt Lake City. There, as elsewhere around the system, from station managers' offices to producers' opium dens (I kid, of course) there's more and more talk about the importance of story, of the "return of narrative" to public radio, of restoring the tradition that made many of us fall in love with public radio in the first place -- those terrific stories and personal pieces (not commentaries) that

a) you just can't forget and

b) you've got to rush out and tell somebody else.

Bear with me, and let me include a bit of what I said at KCRW:

Ask someone to draw a radio, you get more or less the same thing. A rectangle with knobs. Ask someone to draw a TV set and the image changes from year to year and age to age.

A few months ago I went to buy my mother a TV set to replace her old one, that had developed some sort of incompatibility problem with her cable provider. I hadn't been shopping for a TV set in years. Was I surprised! I thought the trend in electronics was for things to get smaller and smaller. The smallest sets in this store were 27 inches wide and between 80 and 95 pounds. 27 inches? I hadn't seen any programs worth more than 12.

And that's not to speak of the tube's latest revolutionary incarnation in our homes as the unblinking, liquid eye of the World Wide Web, or the 6.7 Richter-scale-rated, sub-woofer assisted billboard of our home entertainment centers.

The radio, on the other hand, as my colleague Bob Lyons at WGBH said the other day, is evolutionarily perfect. Like a shark, only a benevolent one, like a termite, only a constructive one, it has never changed its shape because it doesn't have to - it is perfectly suited to its purpose.

And its purpose, of course, is to grab us by the ears. Generally the most underappreciated parts of our physical and psychic anatomy.

Hearing, more than any other sense, I believe, goes straight to our core as human beings - connecting us as a community and a culture through speech and song, moving our spirit as music and rhythm, and transmitting our most important teachings to each other in the form of stories.

Far more than we tend to admit, hearing is believing.

The voice is the one internal organ we wear outside our bodies. It carries, far more fully than any outward gesture or piece of "body language" our state of feeling. To hear it is to experience, whether or not we can consciously perceive it fully, the power of someone's character, the truth of their tone.

It's hard to overstate how close radio is to us.

A few years ago I was a guest of transom.org. I was asked to say something about my life in radio. As I thought about it, I realized that radio wasn't just my profession, it was a lifelong companion, teacher and friend. Let me read a few paragraphs of what I wrote.

I'm guessing you have similar stories of your own to tell about your life, not in, but with radio.

+++++++

Under the Influence - Reflections of a Lifelong Radio Junky

It's one of my earliest memories. It's 1951 and I'm listening to the big RCA radio console in our Beverly Hills living room tell us that President Truman has just fired General McArthur. No one's explained what "fired" means, but I figure they strapped this poor guy in a chair, touched a match to his pants and burned him alive. I wonder how my parents can be so happy.

Months later we're living in the mountains of Mexico to escape the cold war and the red scare in the United States. I don't understand politics or Spanish, but radio gives me a sense of home. Every night our short wave radio soothes my homesickness with Gene Autry shows and cowboy music from Texas. Daytime, the air is full of Mexican radio, pouring from public loudspeakers: ten mambo tunes in constant rotation and informational programs on how to keep from getting ringworm: wear shoes. Little by little, it tunes me in to my new life.

Five years later, I'm back in the US. School-days, I play the role of a literate kid in a book-loving family, but every Saturday morning, under the covers, I stay in bed and press my ear to a battery sucking cherry-red Sylvania portable to hear the Top 40 countdown. It gives me the strength and courage to be a teenager.

Radio is also my best way to reach my old man. As his world narrows (he has a debilitating heart condition) he spends a lot of time listening to a little transistor radio he carries everywhere. He calls it his "ear to the cosmos" and sometimes, as a local radio correspondent reporter from my high school, I'm on it! Sunday evenings we hang out in his bedroom listening to the Stan Freeberg Comedy Show on CBS. Freeberg is a magician with sounds. He makes you believe you're hovering inside a helicopter in Las Vegas, lowering a two-ton maraschino cherry on top of the world's largest sundae. My father and I lie next to each other on his bed, laughing.

In 1962 I go to college. The campus is a big, anonymous place but the college FM station is my home. I spend every spare hour there, learning how to make radio. Soon after the start of my sophomore year the Sunday bells of Memorial Church ring on Friday and a circle of students in Harvard Yard surround a kid with a portable radio. Kennedy has been

shot. For the next forty-eight hours I live at the station, helping to cover the aftermath of the assassination and making my connection with history and with the rest of the world.

It's the late '60s and I tune in, turn-on and drop out of grad school in New York; FM gets hip and locks its signal on London and British rock. I'm also in range of WBAI, an independent station. Radio rock and listener-supported talk become my main source of images, ideas and impressions of the world. It's radio that tells me that RFK and Martin Luther King have been shot, that the inner cities are burning, that love is all you need, that my draft number is 354 and I won't have to choose between living in Canada, protesting in prison or fighting in Vietnam. Radio -- and only radio -- gives me the big picture. TV is simply not a factor.

+++++++

Radio is personal. And public radio is the most personal.

There are many reasons national public radio is "national personal radio," but if I had to choose one I'd say it's because public radio tells great, personal stories.

What I mean by a great personal story is a story that, once you've heard it, you can't forget, a story that, as soon as you've heard it, you have to tell someone else.

A great story is actually a life form of its own. A kind of virus that uses people to spread.

They can be funny or sad, inevitable or surprising, about people in the headlines or way to the side - but they are unforgettable and they are infectious and I'm betting that any one of you who treasures your relationship with public radio can close your eyes and call to mind the ones you never forgot.

Something about them, the personalities, the actions, the everyday details, got to you, became part of your own experience, helped you appreciate something you hadn't known or had overlooked in someone else or in yourself. Like life stories exchanged around a kind of national campfire, the collected stories of national public radio over the last half century have become part of our experience of ourselves as Americans, at home and in relation to the world.

They help us understand who we are, where we're coming from, what we can do, and we need to keep telling them today more than ever.

We live on a planet rapidly shrinking to the size of a very crowded room -- a world rapidly losing its borders and its buffers of time and distance, that gave us the luxury of reflecting before reacting, of thinking big instead of acting small, of considering what we may all have

in common as human beings before turning each other into scapegoats to blame for all our woes.

We in public radio also need to keep telling fresh stories to keep us safe from the consequences of our own middle age. For the first time in its history, public radio is old enough and perhaps, even flush enough, to be at risk of osteoporosis.

We need new stories, and new story tellers, to show us new territory, and new images of ourselves, and new ways of experiencing the world. We need to remember that breakthroughs and new hits tend to come in from the outside, to bubble up from the street, and not trickle down from the top floor of a programming department.

There are plenty of signs of life out there.

THIS AMERICAN LIFE is the biggest sign of life. A miracle for the number of unforgettable stories you not only produce, but keep producing.

There are some other exciting efforts coming along. Here, at WGBH, we're about to officially inaugurate one I can talk more about later.

So -- do you feel there's a renaissance out there? And, if so, given your experience getting TAL distributed, are the new stories more likely to come from outside regular channels or not?

P.W. Fenton - 07:20pm May 21, 2004 EST (#65 of 146)

What's the deal?

Over 1600 words, and maybe 30 of them address Ira Glass in some way.

Thanks for sharing.

Jackson - 12:12am May 22, 2004 EST (#66 of 146)

Liar's Story

Music, music , music. I've got the Camelot thing -- a no-brainer. But what's the other -- the one that compels me to walk into the kitchen and find the big carving knife?

So tell me about the musical choices here.

Which reminds me: Did anyone see the Polly Bergen impersonation of Marilyn on The Sopranos this season?? Liars is such a wonderful theme. Ira, have you thought about a post-Iraq update of the episode?

Jack Dotson - 01:03am May 22, 2004 EST (#67 of 146)

Testosterone deal

I was just thinking, I bet Jesus's testosterone levels were very high. What do you think? He seemed to be a man with tremendous drive and purpose.

Really now. I wonder.

Ira Glass - 05:07pm May 22, 2004 EST (#68 of 146)

When you go about starting a story, do you have the sense that those big ideas are already there ...

Absolutely. And you need to have a sense what the ideas might be. You need it before your interview because, basically, any idea you wanna talk about in a radio story, you're gonna want tape on. So you wanna float the ideas by your interviewees. Maybe they'll bite, maybe they'll tell you that you have it all wrong and will set you straight (which'll also work on the air). Sometimes nothing works. Then you have to put the ideas in your script, with no tape to back them up. Or you kill the story.

... or do they usually surprise you?

In a good story, what makes it good is that they surprise you. The very best stories, there are lots of surprises which deepen the story. Best example of that I think, is the guy talking about the family his sister invented, the McCrearies, in our **Babysitting show**. Nearly every idea question I put to him, he replies with some other idea, or some complete narrative.

I know that all reporting has an inherent slant or bias but was it hard to learn not to work towards the answers that you wanted to hear?

No. Because I really don't go into an interview thinking that the interviewee will see the story a certain way, and trying to get them to say that. It's more like I've got a bunch of

theories about what the story might mean, and I run all those by the interviewee, and also solicit their theories.

Ira Glass - 05:27pm May 22, 2004 EST (#69 of 146)

What do you use for field recording?

For our show we all generally use cassette recorders. We had bad experiences with minidisks failing. And the DAT machines we were able to afford were more fragile than we'd like for the field. We have a Marantz portable hard disc recorder that we just bought but it still seems complicated and none of us trust it just yet.

Specifically: we use the Sony TC-D5 with the Audio Technica AT 835B shotgun mic. Electronics are as subjective as anything else. Sometimes a mic will simply work prettily with a certain recorder. These two sound good together. I bought myself this gear and used it for years as an NPR reporter (NPR's standard issue gear at the time was this lousy non-dolby mono cassette machine that didn't sound very good). Now the show has eight or ten kits set up this way.

There are better mics and better recorders. But I honestly don't care if the sound is super-lovely. I just care that it's good enough to carry the story. When I hear David Isay's work - which is recorded digitally using these super-expensive phantom-powered mics - I hear a huge difference, and always feel a little jealous. But what we lose in sound quality on our show we gain in reliability and flexibility. The TC-D5 is a tape recorder you can ship around the country, over and over, which we do. You can explain to somehow how to use it over the phone, which we do. It's good enough.

Another advantage of cassettes: they're cheap, and if you run out while you're in the field, you can buy more pretty much anywhere.

In general, when people's tape sounds bad, I find it isn't because their gear is so bad. It's because they're shy (as everyone is at first) about getting in close with the mic. Or they have the interview in an unnecessarily noisy, buzzy annoying environment for the interview. The best thing you can do to improve most recordings is simply to get closer with the mic. A minidisk with a good shotgun mic should get you better-than-average recordings, if you're careful with the mic.

God all my answers are long. Will try to be briefer.

Ira Glass - 05:47pm May 22, 2004 EST (#70 of 146)

I wonder what you think of the music in the “Liars Story.”

In retrospect it's probably a little grand for the story. And I wouldn't use the same piece over and over in one story today the same way. This was early in my evolution of using music.

Would you edit your part in an interview to make your self sound better than you were?

Ohmigod yes. Unless some moment of my lameness makes some bigger point that serves the story, of course it comes out.

Ira Glass - 06:15pm May 22, 2004 EST (#71 of 146)

Are these “big ideas” the reason why teenagers are featured so often on the show? They all seem to be so filled with “big ideas” that they come tumbling out of their mouths with no regard to how completely inane and cringeworthy they are.

No, we love teenagers more than this. If we thought they were inane, we wouldn't put them on the show. We use them on the show because, as with anyone else on the show, we find there's something in their stories and ideas that we relate to.

Also, in certain stories, they're making decisions that'll affect long stretches of their lives ahead, so the stakes are high, in a way that's rare once people become adults. That can make a good story, too.

Ira Glass - 06:25pm May 22, 2004 EST (#72 of 146)

So, can you go to a movie anymore without hearing the soundtrack and thinking, “wow, this is going to be great behind a radio piece someday?”

Sadly, no. I'm a real dork when it comes to noticing the scoring of things. Like have you noticed the two different ways they score the opening scene of *The West Wing* each week? I actually prefer one of them over the other. That's the level of dorkdom.

Jay Allison - 07:47pm May 22, 2004 EST (#73 of 146)

cat out of bag

"Specifically: we use the Sony TC-D5"

Damn. So much for my chances of ever getting one on Ebay again.

Hans Anderson - 12:13am May 23, 2004 EST (#74 of 146)

PRX -> TAL

There is a category on PRX that allows a reviewer to say the tone of a piece is "This American Life-esque." I've chosen that a few times when writing reviews but not because of the story-surprise-reflection thing.

So, does TAL surf PRX? If so, do reviewers that say the tone of a piece is TAL-ish help your efforts or do people like me who think it's TAL-ish because it had some music behind it and was well produced make it all irrelevant, and maybe a bit frustrating? Also, from your experience, do the reviews help? If not, how could it be done better?

You know the PRX people better than I, but I want to say that my understanding is they want the reviews to help PD's and producers filter things that would fit for their station or show.

Robert Krulwich - 10:33am May 23, 2004 EST (#75 of 146)

On a different note

Ira--

I want to ask about something different.

You run a shop.

Folks work with you, not always in the same city, but there's a core. A home team.

Then there are regulars. Sarah and Jonathan and Alex K., Rushkoff, Sedaris...

Then, always, there's been this flutter of passing voices; you hear them once or twice, John Perry Barlow comes to mind, then not at all for a long stretch.

How do you handle these, I'm guessing, very different relationships? The ones who stay, the ones who come and go, the ones who bop by?

Do you cultivate them, befriend them, seek them out? Do they bother you? Like you?
Does it matter?
Are they jealous of each other? Sullen? Pushy? How much energy does the society of
TAL take out of you?

The couple of times I've appeared on the show, you've found me, interviewed me,
processed me and --boom! I'm on. No sweat. No fuss. Another time I was beseeched,
submitted, and rejected just as breezily. Again no fuss.
But I can't believe this is normal.

I think about what you do.
I feel you sniffing for stories, like a dog in heat, taking pleasure in the sniffing...I imagine
you wandering through a week, catching a scent, hunting it down, shaking somebody's
hand, sitting them down, listening to their story, thinking, no to this one, no to that one,
then, for some reason, yes! Then you go in deeper. You are inside somebody's head now,
pulling the story out, dusting it off, clipping it a bit, buttoning the loose buttons, patting it on
the head and putting it on the radio. Someone else's voice. Someone else's story. But
filtered somehow. Made to belong to the stories around it. Given shape and given
company.
This isn't a solo act.
It's all about listening and manipulating and arguing and consoling and insisting.
Can you talk about that?

Ira Glass - 11:10am May 23, 2004 EST (#76 of 146)

Hans ...

I love the whole idea of PRX, but I've only visited a handful of times. I don't think any of us
from the show are surfing there regularly.

Seems to make sense that one of the categories is "This American Life-esque." There
definitely is a distinct sound to the show, and even if someone's story doesn't have the
same structure we'd use, it might share subject matter or tone or production style.

And Robert ...

What you're asking about is hard to answer in the short space of one of these postings.
The first thing to say is that usually it's not me doing the thinking and asking and sniffing for
stories, it's Julie Snyder, the show's Senior Producer, or one of the show's other six
producers. Maybe they'll want to respond here too. I think what happens is that we're in
touch in a more ongoing way with the regular contributors, sharing ideas about what we're
looking for and them sharing ideas for things they want to do. It's a pretty wide circle,

though. I always get the sense that Julie's in email conversation with dozens of people at once, strangers and regulars, who are pitching ideas and getting her feedback.

Do you cultivate them, befriend them, seek them out?

Because of the rush of production, I'm guessing we could probably do a better job of reaching out to them. We cultivate in fits and starts.

Are they jealous of each other? Sullen? Pushy?

I think there's remarkably little bad feeling from people. Next to none. Again, maybe Julie will correct me on that.

I'll think more about all your questions. A lot of the listening and arguing and consoling and insisting is with each other, on the staff. I think that can be really emotional for all of us. Though in that way, it's no different from any show I've ever worked on.

Grace - 12:43pm May 23, 2004 EST (#77 of 146)

ethics on a sunday morning

Hi Ira,

I was wondering if you could talk a little about your relationships with the people whose stories you tell on the show. Because a lot of the stories on the show seem to be told in a confessional mode as opposed to a journalistic one, I'm wondering if there are some people who even though they knew everything they said was being recorded have come to you upset after the show has aired. Like, "that's not me at all!" or "I didn't think you would use *that* part." Or people who whose stories you develop with a certain idea of their character only to realize that this person you're trying to represent is not the character in your story? (Here, I'm not really talking about the people who seek you out because they want to tell their story on the air, but the people who seem like they come from farther afield - for example, the guy on the show about the McCrearys, not Adam Davidson.)

I'm asking this partly because I'm assistant editing on a reality tv show right now (insert some sort of cloying self-justification here about paying rent and eating and how i thought this would be better than working as a receptionist at an investment bank but now i'm not so sure.) Even though the show is billed as an altruistic endeavor, I know that some of the people featured are going to be a little miffed at the way they are portrayed and would be livid if they heard some of the producers' discussions about their story lines. I'm curious to know if you guys ever have had similar reservations on the other, more high-minded and ethical, side of the fence.

Thanks.

Anaheed Alani - 03:00pm May 23, 2004 EST (#78 of 146)

OH MY GOD GRACE DO YOU WORK FOR STARTING OVER?!

liz - 03:08pm May 23, 2004 EST (#79 of 146)

Same Story, Different Medium

Hi Ira,

To get more mileage out my radio stories, I try to rework each piece for print. I sat 'try' because I keep pushing the writing work to the backburner while I move on to the next audio story.

Anyway...do you have any advice or experience about repurposing stories for a printed version? Considering your stable of regular contributors who are also successful writers/authors, it seems many of the stories we hear on TAL must also have a written counterpart.

Is the writing work for each a completely separate style or format? Any tips on reworking/reselling? Would you say the majority of your contributors are also writers (in the traditional print sort of way) or are there many who work exclusively with audio?

Thanks!

Brandon Brown - 03:26pm May 23, 2004 EST (#80 of 146)

channeling the storyteller

Ira,

Because of the field that I work in, (video), it's essential for the speaker to nail their own stories as best as possible, I can't edit out every digression or re-organize the entire story into something more fluid and intelligible. If I like the story, but could use a better delivery, we just take it from the top.

But, turning a person into an actor, even if they are playing themselves, comes with its own problems--namely overacting. Bringing out the best in someone will always be better than just asking them to be better.

One of the most captivating things about TAL is the spectacular grace with which the non-radio guests tell their stories. I'm under no illusion that your editors deserve a good deal of credit for this fact. But there's clearly a dynamic that takes place when the interview is being conducted. At some points in the stories, you can actually hear the speaker change his/her tone to a whisper, and I can see them leaning forward to confess whatever idea they're making us privy to at that moment, (Myron Jones in the Babysitting episode comes to mind). What steps do you take to pull out this casual and competent (to say the least,) storyteller in your guests?

Grace - 04:13pm May 23, 2004 EST (#81 of 146)

nope, not starting over...

and ag! now i'm a little worried about my post. i do need to continue working you know...

Elliot Margolies - 04:48pm May 23, 2004 EST (#82 of 146)

Day to day roles etc.

Hi Ira,

A few days ago I pulled an old tape of TAL - "The Allure of Crime" (I listen to them when I exercise) and it was just as compelling the second time around, even though I could remember a fair amount of what the storytellers were going to say.

I'd like to hear an example or two of how you and the other producers struggle in the development of a particular show. What pushes and pulls? How do your ultimate decisions reflect in the final product?

I wonder in general about the different staff roles - what each person does in the creation of a show. Also about the process of getting a whole new "genre-busting" series onto NPR as opposed to special features within the existing series. Does it start at an individual station?

A last question unrelated to TAL if you have time. When you did those fabulous pieces about the identity groups at the Chicago high school, did you need parent releases for what the students who were minors might say on the piece? Are those pieces publicly accessible anywhere today?

Joshua Kilpatrick - 05:57pm May 23, 2004 EST (#83 of 146)

Working with the Subject's Voice

Ira:

Your subjects always seem well spoken. When you're working with someone during an interview, do you ever coach them on the speed or volume of their speech? Can someone's voice ruin the chances of a story coming together from their tape? If you detect such a possibility do you ever try to intervene to help them speak more clearly, softly, loudly, or slowly?

Maybe a dumb question... when you talk about manipulating tape, you really just mean you have imported the material into a digital editor and are working with it there, right? You guys don't cut and splice tape, do you?

Joshua, Dallas

lisa ayuso - 03:52pm May 24, 2004 EST (#84 of 146)

Crushes

I have a kind of personal question for you because well ... I am bored at work on a holiday and frankly I need some me time ... some personal one on one. Stranger or no stranger (I try to imitate your voice sometimes to make me feel better even though it makes my best friend laugh -I do it with love).

You work with some people very closely on personal stories that I am sure you get really drawn into while it unfolds into a radio piece. Have you ever fell for someone you worked closely with on a radio story? Had a work crush on someone in the building?

I am not saying this in anyway to lure you into my arms or be all creepy. I mean I'm gay and that alone would only mean I would use my charming ways to have a baby if anything else.

I suppose I hear these stories of just pure honest love for something or someone or moments in life that make life worth loving and I can't help but think that people can just shut off to people they spend so much time opening up to and vise versa.

Curious in Canada,
Lisa

Ira Glass - 10:56pm May 24, 2004 EST (#85 of 146)

I've never fallen in love with someone I worked on a story with, but there are lots of moments in interviews where I fall for the interviewee. This can happen whether the interviewee is a man or woman, young or old. Some conversations are so intimate there's no way around it. It happens a little bit in almost any interview that goes well. I've talked to other reporters who this happens to also.

You know what I'm saying, yes? It's not the actionable, jump-on-them kind of love. It's just ... love. Everything they say makes sense and seems sort of wonderful. You just want to keep the friendly warmth of the conversation going. Everything feels easy.

Who's with me on this? Krulwich? Gladstone? Tony Kahn? Joe? Jay? Sean?

Jackson - 11:11pm May 24, 2004 EST (#86 of 146)

"...who this happens to also..."

Seduced! Isn't that the real word for it?

Man, you are practically speaking in the passive voice...

Sue Mell - 11:59pm May 24, 2004 EST (#87 of 146)

"Seduced! Isn't that the real word for it?"

No, no, no!

The opposite of seduction--no trickery involved at all--not in those moments of sheer connect.

Daniel Costello - 01:21am May 25, 2004 EST (#88 of 146)

definition

Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary

se·duce

1 : to persuade to disobedience or disloyalty

- 2 : to lead astray usually by persuasion or false promises
- 3 : to carry out the physical seduction of : entice to sexual intercourse
- 4 : ATTRACT

Because of entries one through three, that probably isn't the best word choice.

Ira, do you feel this connection is a two way thing, or does it vary? Does it happen in any interviews that someone falls for you when you aren't falling for them? And if they do, do you have to be careful not to take advantage and have them say more than they might otherwise want to?

Ira Glass - 01:49am May 25, 2004 EST (#89 of 146)

Ira, do you feel this connection is a two way thing

Nah, I think of it more as just a nice feeling I'm getting about them. It's not bigger than that. And it's easier for me to have that feeling about them: they're the ones doing all the revealing of themselves, after all. Me, I'm asking a combination of good questions and bad ones. You hear the stuff I asked Adam Davidson that never made it on the air? Not very, um, crushworthy.

Ira Glass - 01:54am May 25, 2004 EST (#90 of 146)

during an interview, do you ever coach them on the speed or volume of their speech?

Never. Though I will sometimes say, "wait a sec, explain that again, I don't think that was clear" or "tell that part again, I didn't get that." It's still a normal conversation.

Can someone's voice ruin the chances of a story coming together from their tape?

I can't think of one time it has.

When you talk about manipulating tape, you really just mean you have imported the material into a digital editor and are working with it there, right?

Right. Though all the things we do in the digital editor us oldsters used to do with analog tape, cutting and pasting.

Joshua Kilpatrick - 12:00pm May 25, 2004 EST (#91 of 146)

Making Them Comfortable

Ira:

Obviously, you and your crew are masters at making ordinary people comfortable to tell their stories in natural ways. As I've started experimenting, I've found that the microphone is just like a camera, people go brain-dead when I bring it out... or atleast they act much less natural. (Is this why you use a boom mic?)

Here come the questions:

- What are some of your favorite techniques?
- How do you prep a subject for an interview?
- What sort of things do you do/say to help them get comfortable?
- What kinds of environments do you interview in? (home, cafe, hut?)
- How do you sike yourself up (or down) to see this as - just another conversation?
- Is their a set of "throw away" questions you always start with - just to get things rolling?
- Do you use a technician to capture the recordings or do you manage the equipment yourself?
- How do you place the boom mic to make this seem natural, to keep the equipment from being a distraction?

Example: You get a call from a friend who tells you about some lady in the Mississippi Delta that everyone goes to for advice - she's special - peoples lives are changed. The story sounds great. You negotiate the interview, fly to the delta, meet the lady at her house and say....

RANDOM:

I can give a hearty second to the previously voiced interest in "Pop Vultures". That's some smart and funny stuff.

I just listened to Maroon 5's "This Love" ten times in a row. Why did I do that? Why does that song make me happy?

Rupa Marya - 10:01am May 26, 2004 EST (#92 of 146)

Cultural Archetype.

Ira,

When we interview people, we're asking them to tell us something about themselves, hopefully something integral to the way they see themselves. And then we're listening, asking questions to go deeper and perhaps leading to more revealing (revelations). It's no wonder people feel squishy as a result.

We become in those moments a friend who has no immediate emotional baggage to get in the way, a quasi-confidant with broadcasting equipment, a shrink that doesn't ask for money to listen and doesn't tell you what's wrong with you at the end of it, a shaman with a talking stick (the mic) and no rattles or rites, a priest at confession who doesn't lay on the guilt and ask for some Hail Marys. Good interviewers fit into a classic social archetype, only with no strings attached.

Do you ever feel any lingering obligations to those people who have entrusted you with their stories after you're done with the show? Are there interviews where the subject matter has gotten in the way of your ability to really listen and connect with the person talking, where you've felt alienated by what they're saying? If so, how do you get back in the game?

Jake Warga - 11:56am May 26, 2004 EST (#93 of 146)

Not strange than FICTION

"...some are documentaries, some are fiction, some are something else. Each week we choose ..."

I will never forget trying to drown an armadillo.

Why is that?

Can we talk on the theme of fiction?

Hans Anderson - 01:18pm May 26, 2004 EST (#94 of 146)

more FICTION

I do almost all audio fiction, it's what I like. For me, the turning point was this piece called "The Man in the Well." Disturbing. I was new to TAL then and thought it was all true stories, which made me a little nervous when I heard that piece.

<http://207.70.82.73/pages/descriptions/96/27.html>

In "Cruelty of Children"

I know this has been sort-of asked before, but if you have a group of people you invite (as you say each week) to submit pieces on a theme... how does a person get on that list, even if just to be emailed? A lot of times I think I would have a good pre-Act idea... maybe as simple as someone I know that would be good for you to talk to, and less often I feel I have something that would fit a theme.

Hans

Cameron Stallones - 02:32pm May 26, 2004 EST (#95 of 146)

pop vultures

I've been listening to this, on everyones recommendations, and i've been enjoying it. however, im only up to episode 8, but it seems to have become DRASTICALLY less interesting. the fun of the show was that, essentially it was about jumping up and down in your bedroom when your favorite song comes on the radio: about the excitement and joy of the experience of pop (in the cultural sense, not the "style") music and the pop music machine. thats why I was so happy that they never spoke to or interviewed any of the artists they discuss: b/c its has little or nothign to do with the musicians.

since then it seems like they are trying to justify there tastes, and build their "credibility" by name dropping a lot of rock history, and its kinda breaking down. coming from an incurable music collector (and im sorry, I dont pretend to know everythign, or even much compared to most music fans), their opinions actually aren't that valid, in comparison to most good rock criticism, etc. i'm a firm believer in the essence and joy of music, and liking what you like: and extremely happy to listen to that expressed. and thats why I couldnt criticize the earlier episodes: b/c it seemed entirely about that experience, and not about rock criticism.

but when they actually start pontificating about their "higher" opinions, I just start to wish I was reading a better rock magazine with better critics, and the whole thing starts to feel like when pitchfork magazine gives the newest booty rap single a 9.9 to score some sort of "iron-o points."

as for the format, I started out loving it, but it seems to be getting tired as well. and I cant help thinking that her calls to hillary sound an awful lot like letterman's calls to stephanie.

but anyways, its still probably one of the most enjoyable non-news listens on public radio. I hope they continue to find their feet.

Catherine Stifter - 03:08pm May 26, 2004 EST (#96 of 146)

Hi Ira

What is your favorite metaphor for your success? Jay calls you the "pied piper" without the rats and stuff. Somebody wrote that you called music "the basil" of radio. I bet you've read some pretty weird things about yourself since you made the big time...any favorites or least favorites?

Just to let you know that even here in redneck rural northern CA, folks just love TAL. Me too.

Can you give me some advice? I'm taking a dozen or so "inner city kids" on an expedition to explore Hetch Hetchy, the reservoir that stores and delivers drinking water to San Francisco. As you may know, a bunch of people want to take down the dam there, so they can use the Hetch Hetchy valley as a spill over for all the tourists who are crowding Yosemite Valley. Even the Park Service is thinking seriously about it as a solution to "congestion". My job? Teach the kids how to record audio and take digital pics. Help them make a radio doc about their experiences learning about water issues, hiking, rafting, outdoor group living, leadership and stupid federal officials. OK, that's what I want the documentary to be about, but we'll see.

Any advice? Frankly I've never worked much with the teen population. I mean I can teach them the technical stuff, but other than making your comic book mandatory reading, what else?

Love
Catherine

Daniel Costello - 03:38pm May 26, 2004 EST (#97 of 146)

teens and radio

The teen reporter handbook is a great resource. You can check it out online:

<http://www.radiodiaries.org/resources.html>

For examples, check out Radio Rookies at WNYC:

<http://www.wnyc.org/radiorookies/>

Sean Cole - 08:43pm May 26, 2004 EST (#98 of 146)

It's not the actionable, jump-on-them kind of love. It's just ... love. Everything they say makes sense and seems sort of wonderful. You just want to keep the friendly warmth of the conversation going. Everything feels easy.

Who's with me on this? Krulwich? Gladstone? Tony Kahn? Joe? Jay? Sean?

Totally. I think part of it is that when an interview is going well, when someone is telling you something truly intimate about themselves, or when they exhibit a genuine, unstaged, candid emotion, you can feel the trust they have in you. It's a wonderful feeling to be trusted like that and it inspires reciprocal trust. So even though in most cases you're practically strangers, you're trusting each other like old friends. That probably sounds really sappy and obvious but it's the only way I can think to put it right now. I also really like Rupa's analogy of a shrink patient relationship. Although when things are going great it's more like mutual shrink. I once had a guy say that our interview was like psychotherapy. He said this at the end of a long interview during which I called his family business "creepy." I also said that I could imagine how hard losing his best friend must have been because "I have a best friend and he's my love." This was to a big, tattooed 25 year old guy who worked at a diner in Western Mass. Somehow it didn't even occur to me that I might alienate him.

This was a while ago but when you said...

If you can't tell the story compellingly to a friend, it means either you haven't figured out what the story is really about, or - much more likely - it never will be possible to tell this story compellingly over the radio.

It made me wonder what you think about the idea that some people just aren't good spontaneous, impromptu storytellers even though their story might be great and they do know what the point of it is. My friends always used to make fun of me for telling these

aimless, rambling stories (kind of like this posting) but I feel like the same stories told by a less nervous person would have been great. Also I wonder whether you think there are stories on your show that might not be intrinsically great stories but it's the person who tells them that makes the difference. I'm thinking specifically of Jonathan Goldstien's sauna story in the show about heat. I grew up going to a place like that and I don't feel like could have written something so nuanced and funny and moving about it. Or Brent Runyon's story this past weekend about Coast to Coast AM. Again it's a radio show that tons of people listen to, but not everyone is going to see in it what he saw and be able to articulate it so beautifully.

Sean Cole - 09:02pm May 26, 2004 EST (#99 of 146)

Also, it's really brave of someone to say something very intimate and candid about themselves, and I think that can make you moon over them.

anna - 08:36am May 27, 2004 EST (#100 of 146)

interpreter

Ira,

Because of the field that I work in, (video), it's essential for the speaker to nail their own stories as best as possible, I can't edit out every digression or re-organize the entire story into something more fluid and intelligible. If I like the story, but could use a better delivery, we just take it from the top.

But, turning a person into an actor, even if they are playing themselves, comes with its own problems--namely overacting. Bringing out the best in someone will always be better than just asking them to be better.

One of the most captivating things about TAL is the spectacular grace with which the non-radio guests tell their stories. I'm under no illusion that your editors deserve a good deal of credit for this fact. But there's clearly a dynamic that takes place when the interview is being conducted. At some points in the stories, you can actually hear the speaker change his/her tone to a whisper, and I can see them leaning forward to confess whatever idea they're making us privy to at that moment, (Myron Jones in the Babysitting episode comes to mind). What steps do you take to pull out this casual and competent (to say the least,) storyteller in your guests?

Lee K. - 12:28pm May 27, 2004 EST (#101 of 146)

TAL movies

Ira:

Your Slate diary about pitching TAL to TV networks was great. Your description of the format -- "more like a rock video than a documentary" -- made perfect sense to me. I particularly liked your suggestion that we shouldn't see the speakers, but rather impressionistic images complementing the story instead.

I think I understand why you decided not to do the TV show, but have you ever considered lending the TAL name to a series of documentaries? (I don't mean movies made from TAL stories, such as the deal you have with Warner Bros., but rather new movies done in the style I quoted above.) You could oversee production and see that they lived up to the name. Then when they were screened in cinemas they would already have an audience base to build from. If they were hits, perhaps that could be the basis for a television show.

Lee

AnnaK - 11:17am May 28, 2004 EST (#102 of 146)

Breaking In

You probably get this question all the time and people probably always preface it with "You probably get this question all the time," but how does one create a career in radio starting from just a passion for listening and sharing information?

Is it helpful to return to college for a higher degree, volunteer at a station or just go out into the world with a tape recorder?

Kathy - 10:38pm May 28, 2004 EST (#103 of 146)

Testosterone

Ira, first of all thanks for all you do to entertain, enlighten, and educate us. I love and crave the diversity of your show.

I found the testosterone episode fascinating. It really helped explain the behaviors of some of the people I've known and made me realize that perhaps some of their impulses were

beyond their ability to control. I hope much research will be done in this area. Too cool!
Thanks again!

Jackson - 11:34pm May 28, 2004 EST (#104 of 146)

Beyond their ability to control??!!!

Kathy: I know you meant well when you said this, but this notion of "control" seems to me to be something that touches a deep nerve -- a nerve not even a dentist could find with a probe -- in the radio producer.

Issues of "control," I would argue, lie very close to the heart of the success at TAL. For example, Ira, when you interviewed Squirrel Cop, was there any part of that story you did know not beforehand? Even now, years later, that interview sounds like a voyage of discovery.

AND YET, there are set pieces surrounding that segment that had gone through editorial and production to arrive at their own particular peak of storytelling matched -- more or less -- to the tale told by Squirrel Cop.

How much of the struggle at TAL involves the conflict between "nature" and "contrivance" - - between the story as told in the regular confines of storytelling and the story as evoked by the powers of digital tools that can, in the right hands, make us all sound like giants?

Ira Glass - 12:00pm May 29, 2004 EST (#105 of 146)

Been too busy to post much this past week. Hope to catch up this weekend.

Tony Kahn -- Its interesting reading about how deeply important radios been to you all your life. Im just 15 years younger than you but Im on the other side of a generational line when it comes to that stuff. I was into TV. I was too young and unhip and too far from the big city to know about WBAI or to be caught up in the early days of FM. I never even heard NPR before I wandered in, trying to talk my way into a summer internship (at the time, almost no one had heard of NPR; it was 1978). Most of what I know and love about radio I got by working in radio. Luckily, my first real job was for Keith Talbot, whose work had the kind of feeling to it that makes you realize what the medium can do. The first show of his I worked on was an hour with **Joe Frank**. It completely opened my eyes to a kind of storytelling Id never imagined could exist on radio.

As for whether I think theres a renaissance of narrative ... I do think more people realize how fun it can be to listen to a certain kind of radio narrative, thanks to our show being out

there each week, putting those stories on the air. I meet lots of young people who want to make these kinds of stories now. There are a few more places where people can do that (**The Next Big Thing, The Third Coast Festival, Transom**). Interestingly, all of this is still, in a way, at the margins of what happens on public radio. It hasn't really influenced the programs most people listen to, the big daily shows. Maybe narrative is just a tad more time-consuming to do. Maybe the aesthetic just doesn't suit the taste of the daily producers and editors.

My experience distributing our show to the public radio system has been a good one. Program directors were willing to take a chance on something new. We all were surprised at that. (Though we also tried to make it easy for stations to say yes; we did such killer pledge drives that half of our first hundred stations told us they were signing up because they wanted the fundraiser shows.) Our business plan called for us to get onto, I think it was 65 stations by the end of our second year. That seemed tough but realistic, given the fact that we were so different and so new. We were on over 110 by the end of our first year, distributing the show ourselves. Then we signed up with PRI and they doubled the carriage in 3 months. They're great that way, by the way.

I don't understand why my apostrophes aren't showing up in this post in that second paragraph. I typed them in.

Ira Glass - 01:08pm May 29, 2004 EST (#106 of 146)

Jackson -- That music in the Liars story you ask about ... it's "Perpetuum Mobile" by the Penguin Cafe Orchestra.

Krulwich -- About working with the various collaborators ... So much of it is about chemistry, like anything else. I and my co-producers do so much pushing and trimming and shaping of any story that ends up on the show, including our own, that anyone who wants to be on the show has to put up with a lot of tumbling from us, and if there's not some basic shared sense of what makes the story better, it's hard to come back too many times for more. The people who are on all the time share a sensibility with us. We can push other people through the process, and get them to the kind of story we think is best, but with our regular people, it's not as hard on them or us, because of the shared sensibility.

Grace You ask

I'm wondering if there are some people who have come to you upset after the show has aired. Like, "that's not me at all!"

I can only think of one time, and it was a guy who I disagreed with, on tape, about the way he treated his kids. By and large our stories are a mix of how we see the people and - mostly - how they see themselves. Often what's most interesting is how they see themselves. And there's so much of their point of view that they almost always feel okay about the story in the end.

Are there people whose stories you develop with a certain idea of their character only to realize that this person you're trying to represent is not the character in your story? (Here, I'm not really talking about the people who seek you out because they want to tell their story on the air, but the people who seem like they come from farther afield - for example, the guy on the show about the McCrearys, not Adam Davidson.)

Ohmigod, yes, absolutely, all the time. Also, surprisingly, we get people who think of themselves as filmmakers or writers or reporters who come to us with stories about themselves that, when we get into the details of the stories, turn out to be different ... or to *mean* something different than they think. Like: they think it's a breezy funny story but in fact it's a story demonstrating that they are, in fact, a monster. Or just clueless. Yes yes yes. Fortunately, we're developing a lot of stories at once and can kill these stories and still get our show on the air.

I'm assistant editing on a reality tv show right now ... I know that some of the people featured are going to be a little miffed at the way they are portrayed and would be livid if they heard some of the producers' discussions about their story lines.

Okay, first of all, mean comments in the editing room are simply a natural byproduct of the editing process. Like steam from boiling water. Mean comments happen in every kind of editing, everywhere.

Years ago, my friend Margy did a newspaper story about some guys editing a Sandra Bullock film, a big Hollywood movie, and while she sat there, a reporter from the paper, they felt perfectly free to say very unkind things about people's performances in the shots they were lining up. I think the very process of editing puts you in a kind of - I know this sounds a little crazy - antagonistic relationship with the people on your tape. Because while you're editing, it's all about conjuring the perfect version of the story out of the ether, perfect in every word, every tone of voice, every pause. And the men and women IN the tape? They're just standing in your way. They say 'um' when you need them to say 'and.' They digress when you need them to stay on point. *They are getting in the way of your perfect vision of the perfect version of the story and how could they be so stupid???*

So everyone says mean things while they edit. Even Jay Allison, one of the most decent and kind-hearted people I know, the guy who started Transom, I'll bet even he finds a

small sliver of meanness in his big big heart when he's editing. I choose to believe he curses. I choose to believe fists get pounded against table tops. I choose to believe he shakes his head in wonder and disgust sometimes at how terrible his interviewees' answers were when he asked his very best questions. He's too good an editor not to have that kind of ruthlessness. Even if it only comes out a midnight, in front of his Mac, by the light of a full moon.

Um, but to get back to your question ... Yes, I think it's bad to be cruel to people using the medium of audiotape or videotape. On our show we go out of our way not to make fun of people. Not to be cruel. But some stories, I dunno, people are gonna look bad because they did something bad, yknow? So it really can be a judgement call.

Ira Glass - 01:44pm May 29, 2004 EST (#107 of 146)

Liz -- You wrote

Do you have any advice or experience about repurposing stories for a printed version?

This is a really good question but I'm afraid I don't have anything smart to say about it. I know that a common problem is that direct quotations are often the emotional heart of a radio story -- in fact, good radio stories are often structured around the quotes, with the quotes providing the backbone of the story -- but in print that just won't do. The writer's part of it has to be the center of a print story. And lots of quotes don't translate to the page with the same emotional power they have on radio.

I know that two writers who are on our show a lot -- Jonathan Goldstein and Sarah Vowell -- lurk around Transom sometimes. They have way more experience at this than I do, and I hope they'll post something to answer you. Maybe I'll try to convince Jack Hitt to come look at the board. He's converted a few of his TAL stories to print.

Brandon -- you posted:

There's clearly a dynamic that takes place when the [TAL] interview is being conducted. At some points in the stories, you can actually hear the speaker change his/her tone to a whisper, and I can see them leaning forward to confess whatever idea they're making us privy to at that moment. What steps do you take to pull out this casual and competent storyteller in your guests?

Part of it is not going too deep in the pre-interview. I was struck reading **Errol Morris's Topic** here at Transom, where he talked about the importance of not talking to the

interviewees before the interview, because you wanted to preserve the simple human impulse where they'll still feel a need to tell you the story.

Errol:

I never talk to the people in advance. But I prepare heavily.

Nubar:

Well, I want to ask-- really? You never talk to them?

Errol:

Try not to.

Nubar:

Because?

Errol:

Because I think that there is a real need that people have to talk ... People have a need to talk. And if they've already told you a story, they have dissipated that need.

Reading that gave me pause. I think maybe I do too many interviews on the show where I know where the interviewee is going. Because the best interviews on the show are the ones where the interviewer is discovering the story as it goes. That tone of voice you're liking in Myron can't be faked. It comes from two people actually talking, in a real way. (Or, well, it *can* be faked but that leads to some real cheeseball work.)

I know this isn't a very satisfying answer. It's like saying "*UUUSSSE THE FORRRRCE.*" "*BE REAL WITH YOUR INTERVIEWEES.*" What's a person supposed to do with that?

I can say that the more emotionally present you are, the more yourself you are in an interview, the more likely you are to get to that sort of tape. I catch myself in interviews all the time -- especially interviews in the studio -- being a bit more formal, posing my questions a bit more like Someone On the Radio. Even a little tinge of that kills human feeling, and makes it harder for the other person to talk back to you like a real person and not like a Person Being Interviewed.

I often have to force myself to tell digresssively little stories near the top of the interview to just kind of bring myself on stage as myself.

And - this also is probably not so helpful but it's true - I find that my interviews usually suck for the first twenty minutes or so. It takes that long for me to relax. Not for the interviewee to relax, but for me to relax. Then things get more of the tone you're talking about, Brandon. Once my tone changes, theirs does too.

You'd think after all these years I could just be more relaxed from the top, and be more myself from the top.

Ira Glass - 02:22pm May 29, 2004 EST (#108 of 146)

Elliot -- On a lovely Sunday, you took the time to post:

I'd like to hear an example or two of how you and the other producers struggle in the development of a particular show. What pushes and pulls?

This is a good question but such a big one. It makes my brain hurt to try to think of interesting examples since basically this is all we do for 70 hours a week.

I wonder in general about the different staff roles - what each person does in the creation of a show.

Julie's in charge of finding stories for the show - being the main interface between us and the world. But each show is assigned to one producer who'll take charge of it and be the main one on staff to think about the lineup of stories for that show. So last week's show, "**Fake Science**" was produced by Jane Feltes.

How this works (and hey! here's an answer to your question about pushes and pulls): At some point Julie became concerned that some of the stories we were lining up for that show wouldn't work out ... and also that they all were similar in tone, and a bit serious, and a week before the show, she spotted a thing on the **Fametracker** site that seemed like it'd be lighter and different. We pushed ahead on the various stories and none of them seemed like it was gonna drop out, but on Wednesday the week of the show, two days before the show would air, Jane also started to worry that all the stories were too similar in tone. Also, they were all too long. They wouldn't fit in the show together. So we decided to hold (for an upcoming show) what's going to be a great Jack Hitt story about creationist "scientists" trying to disprove evolution and we set out to sweettalk Adam Sternbergh into reading his Fametracker story on the radio for us.

In terms of process either Julie will work with a producer marching a story through its early stages, or I will ... and then once the story is in pretty good shape, Julie and the producer bring me in or I and the producer bring her in, to hear the whole thing with fresh ears.

With Brent's story in that show, for example, this was the process that got it on the air. His story came out of a conversation he'd had with Julie. We all (all seven producers and me) discussed it in our weekly story meeting and liked it. She assigned him. Producer Lisa Pollak worked with him in choosing tape and structuring the story. I was involved in that too. We did a couple drafts and redrafts and then played it for Julie. She had suggestions

and there were more redrafts. This is typical. If anything, it was easier than usual because Brent's such a good writer.

Each story on the show has a different producer, who works on the story from the start, and takes it through its final mix. That producer usually does the actual mixing, including finding music and fixing levels and everything.

Meanwhile, the week of the show, they and other producers are also working on stories for upcoming shows.

[What's] the process of getting a whole new "genre-busting" series onto NPR as opposed to special features within the existing series. Does it start at an individual station?

It can. We did. At least that way, you're on the air in one city. But it doesn't have to. Anyone can buy time on the public radio satellite and call stations to try to talk them into taking their show. It's not expensive, relatively speaking.

When you did those pieces about the groups at the Chicago high school, did you need parent releases for what the students who were minors might say on the piece? Are those pieces publicly accessible anywhere today?

I don't think those stories are available today. And yes, with minors, if I wanted to use their names, I needed releases. If I didn't use their names, it got into a grey area that I and my editor decided to exploit. Generally we got releases though.

Anaheed Alani - 03:06pm May 29, 2004 EST (#109 of 146)

digesssively little

Do ... what now?

Ira Glass - 03:12pm May 29, 2004 EST (#110 of 146)

Um, that should be "digressive little."

Joshua -- You wrote many questions about interviewing.

I've found that the microphone is just like a camera, people go brain-dead when I bring it out... or atleast they act much less natural. (Is this why you use a boom mic?)

Actually, the boom mic is bigger and more intimidating than a regular mic. And in case it's not clear, we don't use it on a boom. It's just a shotgun mic we hold in our hand. It gets better sound, that's why we use it. Blocks out the surrounding sound.

As for your other questions, I don't prep the interviewee except to explain the kind of show it is, and the kind of thing I'll want to talk about. To make them comfortable, I just try to be comfortable. With the equipment, that's the trick too. If you act like it's normal to be pulling out a tape recorder, if you seem casual about the equipment, that makes it easier for them to feel normal about it. I don't find that people get intimidated by the gear to any big extent. Hopefully they get caught up in the conversation in the first few minutes and any unease goes away. I interview them where I think they'll be comfortable, though if it seems like the sort of story they could tell in a studio, we'll have them come to a studio. We do tons of studio interviews for TAL. I prepare questions - but mostly I make sure I know the big areas of things I need them to talk about. Like, I know I need them to tell this part of the story, and I know I need a response to this question. I don't do throwaway questions to get them going.

I run the gear myself.

Rupa -- you wrote:

Do you ever feel any lingering obligations to those people who have entrusted you with their stories after you're done with the show?

I feel a huge obligation to get their stories right and be fair to them on the air. After that, if someone would come to me needing help or something, I'd try to help. Hasn't happened very often.

Are there interviews where the subject matter has gotten in the way of your ability to really listen and connect with the person talking, where you've felt alienated by what they're saying?

Not really very often. I don't interview many murderers, arms smugglers or the like. Though there are lots of times interviewees say things that I think are deeply wrongheaded and disagree with, but I'm still pretty interested in why they think those things. I don't exactly connect with those people in the same way, but it's interesting to me in the same way as with the people I like.

Jake -- Hi there Jake! You wrote:

Can we talk on the theme of fiction?

The fiction we use on the radio show is like the non-fiction. There's plot and character ... and there's some clear point to it. Not all good fiction necessarily works that way.

Hans -- You write:

I feel I have something that would fit a theme.

Then just write the show! Submission guidelines are [here](#). Don't worry about the themes. We do contact people who we've worked with before and tell them about upcoming themes but we don't want to open that to the whole world. The list would just get too long and random. If you have something you think would work on the show, pitch it. Random pitches from strangers - I'd say at least one story every other show - get on the air. If we like something, we'll find a theme for it.

davisam - 06:02pm May 30, 2004 EST (#111 of 146)

Cohesion, etc.

First, thanks to Ira and everyone else for reading and responding. This is a great community you've made. I've been listening to TAL archives lately and trying to figure out what makes the best episodes the best. Obviously the quality of the individual stories is a huge factor, but it seems like part of what distinguishes really amazing episodes from simply really interesting ones has something to do with the cohesion of the show as a whole. From what I can tell, the really great shows present several perspectives on a topic in a way that allows these perspectives to speak to or interact with each other. I know that sounds vague, but I find it much more difficult to describe this cohesion in cases where it works well than in cases where it doesn't. When there isn't much cohesion, I can leave the show thinking that I just heard several (probably very interesting) stories about the same topic. With my favorite shows, I'll leave feeling like the individual stories were put together to create something larger than themselves. So, my questions. Do you agree with my cohesion observation, and, if yes, how do you make the stories in an episode come together that way?

Nannette - 01:08am Jun 1, 2004 EST (#112 of 146)

thank you

Ira, I really appreciate your generous spirit here, the information you're sharing and the way you're trying to answer everyone.

(I'd like to take a week to form a shorter question, but I'm afraid you'll slip away...)

I mean,

Once upon a time, this guy named Ira arrives on earth, takes a look around and notices people are telling stories. He takes another very careful look, then another, and finally figures out how they do it. How they make the most powerful stories people listen to and learn from.

So Ira makes lots of stories; he helps other people thread stories together and share them. He even helps people make sense of their reactions to those stories.

Ira notices many stories are not told. Maybe half of them. But he doesn't despair because he knows that at least the ones he's telling are universal.

What gives Ira most satisfaction is finding examples that teach about how people are limited unconsciously by stories they believe. In other words, the most illuminating tales are the ones that show how blinding other stories are. He likes it when they show chip away at preconceptions. When they open possibilities for more understanding.

Meanwhile, other story pros are working (some of them for Big Bucks) to take advantage of the same information Ira has figured out. Very consciously, and sometimes unconsciously, they are using the stories people already believe and adjusting them -just so- to their liking, assigning roles of good guys and bad guys. They work hard to reinforce stories just the way they want to to make them nearly impenetrable.

Ira knows his polite chipping away at the story walls is exactly what works, is exactly what he should be doing. You can't scare people. You can't yell at them or they won't listen.

But, dammit if he could take a big swing, if he could just

The one story or truth he wishes he could get at is

###

the parts of the above draft story that are right/wrong are:

the above draft is too _____ long _____ short

It lacks :

___ synonyms for the word "story"

___ a nemesis

___ specificity of the conflict and enemy

___ development of character

___ a love interest

___ a plot

___ suspense

___ a happy ending.

this story can _____ cannot _____ be told.

Raquel - 02:22pm Jun 2, 2004 EST (#113 of 146)

voicing

Ira:

Would you talk about how you coach new contributors in Voicing? They seem to have a certain TAL "sound" -- matter-of-fact, slightly nasal, intimate, confessional, thoughtful but not immune to absurdity and humor. And now -- for better or worse -- everyone wants to sound like that.

Thanks for taking the time to answer all our questions.

adubber - 07:36am Jun 4, 2004 EST (#114 of 146)

Not a question

Ira,

I teach radio at a University in New Zealand. In a few months, I leave for England to start teaching radio at a University in Birmingham. As a researcher, I also study radio. And I make radio too - documentaries, a weekly jazz show, kids programmes, drama - all sorts.

And without wanting to sound cloying or saccharine, I just thought I'd mention here that you're the individual who's had the most impact on the way in which I do all that.

So - no questions. Just thanks.

Cheers,

Dubber

Salvado Fernandito - 05:21pm Jun 4, 2004 EST (#115 of 146)

Tricks, Competitors, & Showstoppers

Dear Ira,

- 1) What tricks and skills have you picked up from your co-producers over the years?
- 2) Who/what do you see as TAL's biggest competition?
- 3) How long and hard did you look within yourself before you made the bold and radical choice to sing the (showstopping!) intro to "The Promised Land"?

Your friend,
Salvado

Barrett Golding - 12:16am Jun 5, 2004 EST (#116 of 146)

generous

Ira, i simply must tell the world the truth about you: TAL not only pays producers more than any other series -- way more than some series, but also y'all go out of your way to make sure producers and producing organizations get proper on-air credit (and on-web at thislie.org). in both \$s and props TAL has been consistently generous. no other pubradio series comes close to this in treating producers as respectfully. thanks.

Hans Anderson - 03:36pm Jun 5, 2004 EST (#117 of 146)

Audible.com

I listen each week via Audible.com, which you mention at the end of each show. Can you give an indication of how many people listen this way? I'm not trying to pry, but I'm trying to understand how a service like Audible can work for PR type programs. I like it over going to your web site because I can listen where/whenever and your show gets some of my money.

How far ahead are you guys? Did you just get done with this weeks show, or do you work a couple weeks ahead?

Thank you,
Hans

Ira Glass - 11:31am Jun 6, 2004 EST (#118 of 146)

Hi everybody. This week's show is safely done ... after a rather difficult Friday where, five hours before broadcast, it became apparent that our show was 74 minutes long. I can finally respond to recent posts ...

Catherine - sorry for taking so long to respond to your post ... (Also: Hi there!)

I bet you've read some pretty weird things about yourself ... any favorites or least favorites?

I love this, from the *Los Angeles Times*, November 7, 2003:

The show is populated by some of the most idiosyncratic correspondents in radio, people with voices or styles far removed from the stentorian ideal found elsewhere on the dial. Like humorist David Sedaris, reedy and wry, who sounds like he always has a cold. Or writer Sarah Vowell, whose small, sardonic voice comes across like a cynical elf.

"Or like me," said Glass, speaking in the familiar style that opens every show -- earnest, a little nerdy and nasal, interspersing pauses with torrents of words, like rain collecting on, and then cascading off, a leaf.

Nobody really comes out of that passage feeling very good about him or herself, but that leaf thing kills me. And for the record ... I'd prefer to think of myself as interspersing pauses with torrents of words, like bursts of quick gunfire from the semiautomatic pistol of a

brawny freedom fighter, one whose sweaty years in the jungle haven't knocked the dreams of liberty from his heart.

You also write ...

Can you give me some advice? I'm taking a dozen or so "inner city kids" on an expedition to explore Hetch Hetchy, the reservoir that stores and delivers drinking water to San Francisco. As you may know, a bunch of people want to take down the dam there, so they can use the Hetch Hetchy valley as a spill over for all the tourists who are crowding Yosemite Valley. Even the Park Service is thinking seriously about it as a solution to "congestion". My job? Teach the kids how to record audio and take digital pics. Help them make a radio doc about their experiences learning about water issues, hiking, rafting, outdoor group living, leadership and stupid federal officials. OK, that's what I want the documentary to be about, but we'll see.

Any advice?

That's a tough one, honey. Because the actual controversy about the dam falls into that unfortunate category of the kind of story that may be important to lots of people, but is surely doomed to generate lots of stultifyingly boring quotes. Can't you just imagine the kind of blahblahblah quotes people -- especially the experts -- are gonna give you about the dam coming down? Just the phrase "water issues" makes any sensible person start to reach for the radio dial. I think your best bet is to help them figure out who's going to care about this issue in a way that's really personal ... and then figure out ways to get those people to tell stories and show you around that'll be interesting. If there are enough people who care deeply about the dam coming down, maybe each kid profiles one off them - and you don't worry much about normal balancing of both sides of the issue.

Though having said all that ... I should admit that I don't actually know one of the most basic things someone should know in giving you advice on something like this. I haven't done enough training to know if it matters at all if the stories they make aren't so interesting to listen to. Could be they'll have just as much fun - or more fun - and learn just as much about radio production (and, y'know, "water issues") if you just work out a list of possible interviewees and scenes, and send them out, and then just help them edit and write from one to the next.

The best you can do, I think, is try to think of people and moments and scenes that'll be interesting to them. Including, maybe, scenes of their trip. If an occasional scene could be about the drama between them on the bus ... the "while this was going on, we were all also wondering if so-and-so was going to notice that so-and-so really likes her" ... or a vignette about so-and-so who never listens to any of the park rangers explaining about the issues and is always wandering off or asking funny questions ... or if some park ranger or

other instructor said something at some point that really seemed amazing and interesting to them ... or if one kid is into the water issues, really into them, in a way the other kids don't get and a discussion could happen on tape about it ... or if the most exciting night of the trip is the night you take them to ice cream and a drive-in, let them document that too ...

Then when you all put the thing together ... you can talk about which stories were the most fun to listen to, and draw conclusions about what works best on radio from that.

I write all this, and I'm guessing it's all so obvious you're way ahead of me on every point. Especially on the one about figuring out what they can document that they care about.

You gonna play them any of Joe's **Teenage Diaries**? If I were a kid, those would totally open up for me a sense of what's possible, which is a big part of what you want. Also, I gotta say, Nancy's report on this week's Iraq Contractors show, her first five minutes are sort of irresistible, and about documenting something in an interesting way. She starts with action ... and then gets to a vox & issue ... all really quick and nicely. Also - and this is probably more advanced than a beginner would be able to imitate - her writing is just fantastic. She's really one of the best radio writers I've ever worked with. Stuff that happens so casually you wouldn't even notice it. Completely conversational language that perfectly and succinctly describes something. At one point she gets shot at and says "and then we hear the fake-sounding pop-pop of real gunfire" ... she describes a guy working at a power plant as "an engineer from Oklahoma who needs to use more sunblock."

Hetchy Hetch? It's really called Hetchy Hetch? THERE'S your story, my friend. I don't know why you're bothering with this water business.

Also, you know the FCC's gonna be all over your ass if you let them say "dam" on the radio.

Ira Glass - 12:38pm Jun 6, 2004 EST (#119 of 146)

Sean - You wrote about the possibility that

... some people just aren't good spontaneous, impromptu storytellers even though their story might be great and they do know what the point of it is. My friends always used to make fun of me for telling these aimless, rambling stories (kind of like this posting) but I feel like the same stories told by a less nervous person would have been great.

I have the same feeling. In person - as my girlfriend, co-workers, sisters, or friends will tell you - I can totally botch the telling of any story. I get nervous, I rush to the conclusion, I

don't render key quotes appropriately, I don't relish the telling but spend the whole time worrying I'm blowing it which pretty much assures that I will blow it. Not good qualities. Thank god I learned to type and use Pro Tools.

Also I wonder whether you think there are stories on your show that might not be intrinsically great stories but it's the person who tells them that makes the difference. I'm thinking specifically of Jonathan Goldstien's sauna story in the show about heat. I grew up going to a place like that and I don't feel like could have written something so nuanced and funny and moving about it. Or Brent Runyon's story this past weekend about Coast to Coast AM.

Yes, two good examples. Some people are just really great observational writers ... and nearly anything they're truly interested in, they'll probably be able to write about compellingly. John Hodgman's another one like that. Some of the things he wants to write about seem impossible to make interesting. I mean, what could be more hashed over and old hat than a story bemoaning the badness of *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace*? Yet **in his hands**, completely charming and fresh and engaging!

Anna - You wrote asking about making people so comfortable in interviews. I hope some of the answers I've posted since about interviewing address what you're asking about. At some level, the quality you're hearing really is that at some point, the interview turns into more of a real conversation, a relaxed conversation. Doing that means trying to not be all official and formal ... and actually expressing real reactions to things ... the interviewee can't get so real if the interviewer isn't emotionally present too.

In the end, it's not gonna happen in every interview, this kind of chemistry between people, and even in our interviews for the show, often it'll only happen for five or six minutes out of the sixty we tape. Then we cut out the stuff that's less stellar and viola! we look like interviewing whizzes.

Lee - You wrote about lending the TAL name to a line of film documentaries, which isn't a bad idea, but it'd still be a lot of work ... even with the most minimal kind of involvement from me and the staff. And while helping decent filmmakers get their films distributed would be nice ... there's not much payoff for us. Being half-involved in someone's else's documentary (especially competent people who don't need our editorial help) doesn't seem so fun or useful. And we're no experts at film documentary anyway, so what would we have to offer besides a name for distribution purposes? In the end, the films wouldn't feel much like the radio show unless we were involved very heavily ... and that seems like it wouldn't be what anyone involved - us or the filmmakers - would want.

AnnaK - You wrote asking how to break into radio. I'm not sure going to school for it is the best route. Really, you just need to get started somewhere. Volunteer at a station or with a show you like. Get some basic skills. Figure it'll be a year or two before you'll make a living

at it, that's generally how long it takes most people, or more, so you'll have a day job elsewhere. Learn to edit sound. It's fun, that part. And ... most important ... know that you can start working on your first story today ... you don't have to wait. Buy or borrow some gear, follow the advice on how to make stories elsewhere here on Transom. Get started. I think a lot of people make the mistake of putting off the day they start working on their own stories ... but that's just putting off the grappling with what it means to make a story. Start now. You'll hit the same questions and problems and frustrations (and also: the same highs and joys and feelings that you-can't-believe-how-cool-this-is) whenever you start. Make it sooner. And if you find you hate it, you'll find that out sooner too. I said this in another post but in case you missed it: don't be shy about borrowing some money from your family (if they're solvent and you're speaking to them) to get started on this possible new career. That's what middle-class people do in America - they turn to their parents for help when they make a new start. The hundreds of dollars you'll need are nothing compared with the cost of more school. (I'm thinking \$400-900 for mic and minidisc or TC D5 cassette ... free pro tools ... and a \$900 Mac ... though you apparently have a computer because you're here on the Internet.)

Jay Allison - 01:23pm Jun 6, 2004 EST (#120 of 146)

responsive or what

If, like me, you've had trouble reaching Ira by phone or email in the past, you may want to consider communicating with him through Transom from now on.

Ira Glass - 01:44pm Jun 6, 2004 EST (#121 of 146)

Nannette - Your post is so much more dramatic and interesting than how I see my life. I don't actually wave my fist at "other story pros" who make more money than me. I don't think people are using my secret principles of storytelling, but using them for evil, or something. I don't feel like I'm on a mission to save the world with stories.

It'd be more accurate to say: I have my own taste, and I make stories to my taste. I'm lucky to work with other people with a similar sensibility, so we can have a shared project that in reality, I'm just one part of.

Lots of other people make stories to suit their taste, and that's just fine with me.

Raquel - You ask about voicing. It's vexing, the problem of voicing. Generally, the direction I and my co-workers give most often in the studio is to tell people to tone it down. Project less. Just *tell* me this part, like you're telling a story. Sell it less.

Then the other part of directing is letting people know it's going okay. I can say as someone who's been directed ... it can be traumatic to have someone tell you over and over to do something again ... and it's nice when they say you're doing a good job.

Adlubber - Can I ask ... how in the world did you hear of the show in New Zealand? Despite the "International" in "Public Radio International," our distributor doesn't really send our show down there.

Salvado - You write

1) What tricks and skills have you picked up from your co-producers over the years?

Lots. Doing lots of tape-to-tape transitions in stories I learned from a producer I worked with at NPR. And there's a kind of mix I noticed Jay Allison doing a lot that every time I do it, I think of as his trick - though I'm guessing that he doesn't think of it that way. It's this: a scene ends, music comes up, and rather than go to script or a quote for the next scene to start, you go to ambient sound from that scene first ... so the sound mixes on top of the music and then someone speaks. Reading this here probably doesn't give a sense of what a nice, different-sounding move this can be. I thought of Jay and the fact that I got it from him on Friday, working on the Iraq Contractors show, when we mixed the transition from the restaurant scene to the car scene. In an earlier mix of the car scene, it didn't start with the driving ambience, but I realized we could do "Jay's mix" and we added it on there.

In a more general way ... working with good writers reminds me to be more ambitious in my radio writing. Left to my own devices, I can be kind of simple, just say enough to get you from point a to point b.

And I'm constantly taking cues from my co-producers about what might be interesting on the air. That's one of the biggest things I get from working with other people.

2) Who/what do you see as TAL's biggest competition?

That damn Smarty Jones. I'm sure he'll be back next year, stronger than ever.

3) How long and hard did you look within yourself before you made the bold and radical choice to sing the (showstopping!) intro to "The Promised Land"?

Awww, nice of you to notice. Sadly, not long or hard at all. I know that as a singer I'm what Randy on *American Idol* would call "pitchy" ... but it seemed like the sort of thing where enthusiastic amateurishness would work for us, combined with the element of surprise. That was key, the element of surprise.

It was all a last-minute idea, and it was written and on the air before there was time to mull it over. If there'd been time to mull, that might've killed it. The night before the show aired, I was writing the top of the show, and got to a certain point in my script and realized, oh, I've kind of written myself into a corner here, I'm talking all about how people start their movies

and stage shows with an "I Wish" song and here we are at the top of our show - don't I kind of have to burst into song, to fulfill the idea of what we're talking about?

Fortunately, this incredibly talented pianist for Second City, Brian, pretty much could take the lyrics and turn them into a real song in about ten minutes.

Ira Glass - 02:12pm Jun 6, 2004 EST (#122 of 146)

Last call.

We're going to shut down this discussion in a few days. Get your last thoughts in now ...

Jay Allison - 02:32pm Jun 6, 2004 EST (#123 of 146)

Allison Avenue

I thought Jay's Mix was where you backtime music so that it ends like one sentence before the end of a person's bite and it really makes that last sentence stand out in its silence. Can that be Jay's Mix too?

Salvado Fernandito - 04:47pm Jun 6, 2004 EST (#124 of 146)

Celebrity Fashion, America, Pride.

Ira, I wouldn't lose sleep over your so-called "competition." That defeated nag clocks just 42mph. Radio waves? Those approach the speed of light, my friend. (Smarty Jones doesn't look so smart now, does he?)

Since the discussion's winding down...

- 1) TAL's been trending away from the idea that it would cover "nothing in the news" to covering deeply important news from unexpected angles. Is that a trend you see continuing? Ebbing? Morphing into a focus on hot celebrity fashion trends?
- 2) What are the "American" requirements for TAL? Is it even a requirement for the stories you put on the air? Have you turned down stories because they had no overt American link?
- 3) Which show are you proudest of?

Salvado

Ira Glass - 09:54pm Jun 6, 2004 EST (#125 of 146)

Jay, yes that one too.

Salvado - You wrote:

1) *TAL's been trending away from the idea that it would cover "nothing in the news" to covering deeply important news from unexpected angles. Is that a trend you see continuing? Ebbing?*

Continuing. The format of the show, in the end, is just a frame so the staff can do the stories it finds most compelling. I expect at least for a while, the news will stay pretty compelling.

2) *What are the "American" requirements for TAL?*

None. We don't care. We're Americans and if we find it interesting, that's enough for us.

3) *Which show are you proudest of?*

There's a bunch. They're so different from each other. Doing the Iraq Contractors show this week I thought a lot about the show we did on the aircraft carrier, which was similar in tone and approach. I feel like we really own everything about the feeling of that show. It's like nothing else.

Elysia, long ago, you wrote

Have you always used the Act I, Act II, Act III to outline the program? The music in between acts often does the same thing as in theatre ...

It took a few weeks of shows before we came up with the Act I, Act II thing. I remember that before we had that, I kept feeling like the show didn't have enough weekly rituals yet (which all weekly broadcasts need) ... and was lacking something that let you know where you were and where you were going. I learned from my mentor, Keith, that it's important in a radio hour that people kind of know where they are and why they're hearing what they're hearing. Weirdly, the Act structure - simply calling them Acts - makes it clearer than just letting one story run into the next. Which we used to do.

Second question, In storytelling the theme comes back again to tie the stories to each other and the characters to the listener, so how do you decide which character to introduce first?

This will be a disappointingly showbiz sort of answer ... but the first story in the show is usually - not always, but usually - the strongest. Or it's the story that most clearly articulates something about the theme. Then the stories after that are arranged for variety

and pacing. We don't want all the documentary stories together in a row, or all the essays, or all the interviews; we'll try to vary the boy-girl-boy thing.

Often we have a story that could fit into a number of upcoming themes. In the first three years of the show, many many episodes of the program contain a story that's really from the previous week's theme but didn't fit. We still hold pieces for later shows, but usually it's not the week after.

Nannette - 01:07am Jun 7, 2004 EST (#126 of 146)

just quickly, for the record, I didn't think you were feeling envious of other storytellers

I'm grateful for every story that debunks a convenient political myth.

thanks to you and all the folks working with you.

I wonder what A. Spiegel would say about voicing now that she's done stories differently for All Things Considered.

I hope you'll come back to Transom again.

Ira Glass - 07:06am Jun 7, 2004 EST (#127 of 146)

Davisam, you wrote:

It seems like part of what distinguishes really amazing episodes from simply really interesting ones has something to do with the cohesion of the show as a whole. From what I can tell, the really great shows present several perspectives on a topic in a way that allows these perspectives to speak to or interact with each other ... When there isn't much cohesion, I can leave the show thinking that I just heard several (probably very interesting) stories about the same topic. With my favorite shows, I'll leave feeling like the individual stories were put together to create something larger than themselves. So, my questions. Do you agree with my cohesion observation, and, if yes, how do you make the stories in an episode come together that way?

Yes yes yes, Davisam, a thousand times yes, I think this is often the difference (though not always) between the good episodes and the really special ones. In the really special

shows, the stories talk to each other and cohere in a way that's more complicated and interesting.

The fact that some shows cohere more than others is really a function of the fact that we're making so many shows. On some, we're lucky enough that we find the right kinds of stories to make the show cohere more before the deadline hits. Others shows we know are just going to be an interesting set of stories that don't relate as closely. That's okay too. Some themes, after all, don't lend themselves to more complicated interweaving of ideas. There, it's more important to have a variety of tones and moods and voices.

Or sometimes a show works out best if it's just one long killer story plus another story that makes sense next to it.

And sometimes we just have to hustle together a show quickly. That's broadcasting. I love the fact that we're on the air every week - that we're doing something that's in the world that way, a visible and regular industrial product. When we have to rush together a show, it just feels like well, that's part of the deal. That's showbiz.

This is kind of a tangent but ... I remember working on *All Things Considered* years ago and Alex Chadwick was filling in as host for a while, and one night we did a terrible show. One of those shows with nothing interesting, that also nearly crashes off the air. Stories barely making their deadlines. Lots of sweat and yelling and fear. And Alex came out of the studio at the end and saw all of us milling around the central area where the editors sat, all of us looking sort of crushed and ashamed and he got this very chipper sound in his voice, just very energetic and upbeat, and said, "Well, I've just gotten off the phone with senior management." A pause. "And the good news is ... tomorrow, we get another chance."

I love that. I love the perpetual glimmer of hope and the never-ending humility of daily and weekly broadcasting. When we do a show that's really great, we can feel like heroes for about a minute, and then we know we still have to be back next week with something else. And when we do a show that's not so great, we know we'll get another shot at it soon enough.

Ira Glass - 07:50pm Jun 7, 2004 EST (#128 of 146)

Hans, you asked about how many people listen to our show through [Audible.com](https://www.audible.com). Our production manager, Todd, informs me that 4,000 shows are currently sold each month by Audible. (We know this because Audible sends us reports listing how many downloads of each episode were bought, so that at the end of the year, we can send royalty checks to the contributors to each show, based on the number of downloads they got.) This 4,000 includes the Audible shows that are sold via the online [Apple store](https://www.apple.com). Not that many, really,

especially compared with the number of RealAudio hits we get each month on our website, which average at 300,000 per month. Some months are a lot more.

As a financial model, this is sort of a loser. The Audible downloads net the show about \$15,000 a year, which we split evenly with the contributors on those shows. The free RealAudio feeds cost WBEZ - simply for the bandwidth, not for the server or the webmaster or any other costs - over \$100,000 a year. Before we got this fancy, money-saving **Akamai streaming**, it cost WBEZ over \$130,000 a year.

Which is to say ... it'll be a while before anyone can fund a decent-sized radio series off Internet listening.

I find those streaming costs to be sort of mind-boggling. The budget for our whole show its first year, including our salaries, satellite costs, building a studio, acquisitions, marketing, travel, everything, wasn't twice \$130,000.

You also ask:

How far ahead are you guys? Did you just get done with this weeks show, or do you work a couple weeks ahead?

We have stories for upcoming shows in the works at all times ... but we actually finish each show the week it's broadcast. In fact, the show is completed like a real radio show ... as a live satellite feed, with me reading live intros in between stories that are rolled off the computer onto DAT tapes.

Sean Cole - 10:07pm Jun 7, 2004 EST (#129 of 146)

In fact, the show is completed like a real radio show ... as a live satellite feed, with me reading live intros in between stories that are rolled off the computer onto DAT tapes.

Ira - This has always interested me. Can you talk a little bit about why you decided to do the show this way? It seems like most other weekly, "non-news" public radio shows pretty much pre-record everything (billboards, intros, etc.), edit it all and then put it up on the satellite as a finished entity. Even some live, daily shows will pre-record their billboards.

Ira Glass - 10:14pm Jun 7, 2004 EST (#130 of 146)

In the early days we tried to assemble the show in the computer and it didn't work so well for us. The whole thing felt more natural to produce the way I was used to producing at *All*

Things Considered ... pre-record the open ... do it as a live show. It felt more like we were really on the radio, for one thing. It felt like a real show.

Or maybe it's just a willful re-edit-'till-the-last-minute quality that's not so healthy.

Nannette - 12:12am Jun 8, 2004 EST (#131 of 146)

shot gun question

last quick shot gun question

You record conversations between two people & among groups with them? I like the idea that you can be less invasive of a person's or a talking couple's personal space. It makes the mic more acceptable, like a camera

Recording two or more people with one shot gun mic, Do you have to be pointing exactly at the person when s/he begins speaking? Isn't it hard to anticipate who'll speak next?

how far away can they (and you) be in a triangle before you get wrist whiplash...?
or do you stand far enough away to rest pointing between them? (I guess this is like analyzing a tennis player's default pose.)

thanks

David Wilcox - 05:03am Jun 8, 2004 EST (#132 of 146)

Private Sector

Hi Ira,

I attended your talk in Austin at the end of April, when you mentioned Nancy Updike's Iraq episode, and I'd been looking forward to it ever since. I just finished listening to it earlier tonight, and I'm just astonished. If it's possible to get sick of the sound of your own dumbfounded silence while listening to something, that show's the one to do it to ya...

You mentioned in discussion the other day the fact that the show ran well over ten minutes long five hours before the feed. I'm curious to hear some details. Such as: how much tape did Updike actually record? Did she do the bulk of the production solo or, if not, how large of a collaboration was it? And finally, with the last minute trimdowns, is there anything you all removed that *really* hurt? If this were a DVD we were talking about, what would make the "deleted scenes" feature?

Again, congratulations to everyone involved. And I'm glad to hear the show will continue to handle news stories; TAL's war reporting has been consistently great the last couple of years.

Hans Anderson - 04:31pm Jun 8, 2004 EST (#133 of 146)

Audible.com #2

Ira,

I did some math, which is not a strong suit of mine, and I came up with TAL getting about \$.08 per show, per listener. I pay \$9.95 per month, about \$2.50 per show. Seems like Audible is doing pretty well in the deal, especially with all of the mentions you give them.

I hope that a better model flies someday, because that's just wrong. Personally, I love audible.com and I'm disappointed you guys aren't having trouble spending all the money you get from them. You know, bend over and knock over a shoebox full of 50s, straighten up, smack your head on an open cupboard full of crisp 20s.

Thanks for spending time on Transom and answering our questions.

Hans

Ira Glass - 04:46pm Jun 8, 2004 EST (#134 of 146)

Thanks. The underwriting at the end of the show is pretty new ... and is a different check from them. Not included in the \$15,000.

Daniel Costello - 09:30pm Jun 8, 2004 EST (#135 of 146)

boring documentaries?

I think most people hear the word documentary and immediately think "BORING!". What has been the problem in the past, and are documentarians improving? Do you think narrative is an essential element to documentaries that was missing? It seems that narrative was thought to be secondary to delivering the facts in older documentaries.

I just saw the new documentary film

Deadline that was mentioned in a TAL episode. For those who don't know, it is on the Death Penalty. A very important issue, but not necessarily something that many people will pay to see a documentary about. It had a narrative arc about Governor Ryan and his decisions about clemency for Illinois' death row inmates. Even though I knew the ending, it kept me riveted. But then would that mean that the movie would have been a dud if it didn't have the Ryan story to follow? I was also riveted by an old, multi-hour British documentary on the holocaust that had lots of compelling stories but only the historical time line to pull it along. Do we need to come up with new word for the documentary form so people aren't scared off?

Daniel Costello - 09:34pm Jun 8, 2004 EST (#136 of 146)

Getting into public radio

I think Public radio has gotten much more difficult to get into--there is an oversupply of people wanting to get in. I have two years of volunteer reporting and production experience at a station, as well as having had a number of paid freelancing jobs. I can't get an job or even an internship anywhere. And to be an NPR intern, you have to be a current college student. Do I go back to school and give no indication of my age (I look young) when I apply? Six more years is a long time to suck--how did you survive?

Rene Gutel - 10:31am Jun 10, 2004 EST (#137 of 146)

getting into pubradio, etc

Daniel, you said:

"I think Public radio has gotten much more difficult to get into--there is an oversupply of people wanting to get in. I have two years of volunteer reporting and production experience at a station, as well as having had a number of paid freelancing jobs. I can't get an job or even an internship anywhere."

Don't know if this thread has dried up or not... but i did want to reply, Daniel, to your message. I obviously don't know what part of the country you're in, or what station you've been volunteering at... but if you're serious about working in radio, try Alaska. I'm not joking. There are 26 public radio stations there, that reach something like 95 percent of the state's population. I speak from experience. Also, are you a member of AIR? Their website has a lot of tips for freelancers.

Andy Knight - 05:55am Jun 11, 2004 EST (#138 of 146)

Let's try to squeak this in under the wire:

1. Weren't many of the TAL producers supposed to join us here? What happened to that? Heads should roll and whatnot.

2. TAL is certainly one of Pubradio's kings of funding, deservedly so. So, as the, um, king of one of the kings, what would you recommend for Transom? (see [Jay Allison, "What's Next For Transom, v.2.0?" #1, 27 Feb 2004 1:04 am](#))

Jackson - 11:29pm Jun 13, 2004 EST (#139 of 146)

Maaaa, the lights, they're gettin' dimmah

I know I haven't spoken up for dozens of slots, but I'm proud to have introduced genres as a new element in your lexicon. Sooooo...

My guess is that people with stories -- as opposed to producers -- have a series of different ways of presenting stories to you (and all at TAL) for follow-up. I'm thinking of the nice man from Buffalo and the imaginary family in particular, but surely others who have never held a mic in their grubby paws before have offered stories to TAL for further perusal.

Are there forms (dare I say it -- genres?) to the stories that come from outside pubrad? I note, for example, the common element of the Father's Day story: the disappeared father. Which, in its turn, leads to the inventive youth, the imaginative prelate...

Ira Glass - 01:54pm Jun 19, 2004 EST (#140 of 146)

Okay, I'm finally free for a few hours to give a few last replies here. Apologies to anyone I didn't answer, or didn't answer well.

Hans - Dunno if you're still interested in this or not, but I've learned that we're paid a 12% royalty on each download from Audible, which we split with the contributors to the show 50/50. Other shows apparently get a higher percentage royalty.

Daniel - You write a few things ...

I think most people hear the word documentary and immediately think "BORING!"

Agreed.

What has been the problem in the past, and are documentarians improving? Do you think narrative is an essential element to documentaries that was missing? It seems that narrative was thought to be secondary to delivering the facts in older documentaries.

I do think documentaries are generally getting more interesting, because there's more emphasis on having a compelling narrative. Or just a sexier sense of what would be generally interesting to people. To call Errol Morris's documentary *Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara* a narrative wouldn't be exactly accurate. But each of the eleven lessons is built around one narrative story, with a plot, or more than one narrative story. And he chooses really compelling stuff for the audience to think about. It's designed as entertainment. That's way different from the old Frederick Wiseman documentaries, which are amazing, but in a very different way. Wiseman lets the camera roll. Pacing is very different. He doesn't lead you by the hand as aggressively to conclusions. We watch people in a hospital, or a classroom, for long stretches. He's not out to hold our attention and interest in the same way as Morris is. There's still a kind of mission behind Morris's work, or Michael Moore's, but it's a mission that's expressed via strong entertainment values.

Documentaries are less boring because documentarians are willing them to be less boring. I like that. I'm for the showbiz impulses.

I think Public radio has gotten much more difficult to get into.

I'm sure that's true. I'm not sure I've got more helpful advice about it than I've already given here when other people asked. Start making stories. Get feedback here on Transom, or throw some money or free dinners at a radio editor or producer who can listen to what you're doing and give you feedback.

Six more years is a long time to suck--how did you survive?

Stubbornness. Lack of any better prospects. Lack of other skills. I just believed that there was something in this that I liked, and thought I could get better at. That's kind of dumb, but it's true. I really didn't make much money for a very long time.

Jackson - you ask:

Are there forms (dare I say it -- genres?) to the stories that come from outside pubrad?

God yes. Absolutely. You seen the tv show *Survivor*?

Andy - you write:

Weren't many of the TAL producers supposed to join us here? What happened to that?

Busy doing their jobs, I guess.

What would you recommend for Transom funding?

I'm afraid the Transom folks are in some uncharted waters here, and the rules that apply to funding a radio show - like getting underwriters who want their names in front of a million people - don't really apply to a project with as small a target audience as Transom. The Transom folks are bravely and inspiringly doing this great, idealistic thing, running this site that gives people skills and provides a next generation to public radio ... but they're going to have to invent a financial model for it. The fact that you're reading these words at all is a testament to what they've achieved. How to keep it going, well, maybe Jay Alison could write a funny book like the new Sedaris bestseller.

Ira Glass - 02:15pm Jun 19, 2004 EST (#141 of 146)

And finally, the last installment in the Manifesto

3. What's Not a Story?

Before we close down this discussion, there was one other thing I had notes about, that I want to write. It's part of my answer to the original questions the people at Transom posed to me:

From all the submissions you get, you must have a sense of Things That Tend NOT To Work... and maybe some ideas for GETTING them to work. For instance, what moves the personal story toward something more? Are there stories that are just not worth pursuing and what do they have in common?

Weeks ago, as part of answering this, I turned to Julie Snyder, the Senior Producer of *This American Life*, who's in charge of overseeing all the submissions. Much more than me, she actually knows the kinds of ideas people send in that don't work. I also asked another producer on the show, Alex Blumberg, who teaches a radio documentary class at Columbia in New York, what kinds of things his students attempt that have little chance of succeeding. What ideas should they kill before they ever start work on them?

Julie told me that one common problem in the pitches we get is that often, people don't understand that in a narrative story, something has to be at stake. They'll say, "I'm going to

be driving across the country and I've bought this tape recorder and I was thinking I'd record the people I meet along the way." That kind of idea would be hard to turn into a narrative story because there's nothing at stake. There's no question driving it forward, nothing compelling that the characters are trying to figure out in these scenes. Also: there's no conflict. Narrative can't happen without conflict, without people who want different things, or see things in different ways.

Compare that pitch with one of the few travel stories we've done on the show, in an episode of the program we called "**Trek.**" In that story, two best friends went to South Africa for the first time, shortly after the end of apartheid. There were two things at stake in the story. First, one of the guys had found out he had distant relatives in South Africa and he wanted to meet them, hoping they hadn't been racists and supporters of the apartheid state, but instead part of the political opposition. This was the mission/question part of the story. This mission actually gets them into some dramatic discussions with the guy's family and with each other, scenes where it really feels like people are sizing each other up and talking and arguing.

The second conflict in the story comes from the fact that one of the guys was black and one was white. In America, as best friends, they'd never really talked much about race. Once they were in South Africa, they had very different reactions to the people they met and the things they saw, and started arguing about race a lot, and fighting for the first time in their friendship.

Julie also said it's common for someone to pitch us a story that's not really a story but just the germ of an idea that could lead to a story. They'll write saying "I thought it'd be interesting to ..." but haven't worked out the characters or conflict. Like: "I thought it'd be interesting to check with a family that won the lottery four years ago, to see what happened to them." That's the kind of thing it's hard for us to say yes to because again, there's no conflict and nothing at stake. In this kind of case, Julie will suggest that the person pitching go out and find a family, to see if there's anything surprising and compelling to report, some interesting experience they went through, with hopefully at least one person who's a good talker.

Sometimes, Julie says, reporters who are used to a more traditional kind of reporting - especially reporters who've worked mostly in print -- don't understand that one big difference between print and radio is that a radio story needs a certain amount of suspense and surprise to keep people listening. They'll pitch descriptive kinds of feature stories that might work in print, but that aren't inherently compelling as radio. An example: more than once, reporters have pitched us the idea of doing stories about the "sandhogs," the workers who dig tunnels around big East Coast cities. Some families have generations of sandhogs in them. "It's perfect for radio," the reporters say, "because these guys have these great voices, and you'll hear the echoes of the tunnels, and the sounds of the equipment." Julie asks them, what's the conflict, what's the drama? And the reporters

might point to some news peg - a tunnel completed by these guys, maybe. But for our kind of show, that's not enough. We need more of a narrative. Julie sometimes tells people that for a story like this to work in our show, it has to center around one drama, like a Hollywood movie does. If there were a feature movie about these guys, just meeting a few of them wouldn't be enough. You'd need, I don't know, an older guy who wants his son to get into the family sandhog business, or stay out of the family sandhog business, and the kid wants something different from his old man, and it's all coming to a head. Or you'd need a woman who wants to join the union and do the work her father and grandfather did, work that's always been done by men, and everyone opposes it at first. Those are corny examples that all sound like lost Elia Kazan films from the 50's, but you get the idea: You need a drama, with specific characters. At least to do our kind of story. There are lots of other kinds of reporting. There may even be a nice way to do this on radio.

I feel like a lot of this advice comes down to saying: know what the story is, know what the conflict is, before you get your tape. But I need to also say to you: there are plenty of times - especially as a beginner - when you should just go out and record an interview, even if you don't know what the story is. I sat down with Bradley and Yasuko (whose MP3's appear earlier in this Manifesto) without knowing anything about what kind of tape I'd get. I just thought they were interesting, expressive, emotional talkers. I figured I'd ask them a bunch of questions and look for a story. Then, during the interviews, when I caught the hint of little stories, I fished around to make sure I had everything I needed to put the story on the radio: a beginning, middle and end ... plus some moments where they say some ideas about what it all means. Sometimes you should go get the tape, and then pitch it to the big national program afterwards. With Bradley and Yasuko, I did the interviews and cut the interviews and then pitched them to Morning Edition. Even then, my pitch wasn't much of a pitch. I explained that I had this tape and it was funny and sort of unusual and they should just listen. Because I had a good track record with them, and the tape was so short, that worked out fine.

And here's another caveat. A few paragraphs back, I said that when people pitch us stories like "I'm driving cross-country and I'll tape the people I meet along the way," Julie and I always say no. But one of the best radio reporters in the country, Scott Carrier, began in radio by doing that very story: he hitchhiked across the country and interviewed each person who picked him up. What made his story work was the compelling quality of the interviews, and his writing, and the overall tone of the thing. It had its own sad, yearny sound.

It wasn't a narrative story. It wasn't the kind of thing we usually do on our show. In a sense, it was a harder kind of story to pull off. One thing that makes narrative stories easier than other kinds of stories is that the plot will pull listeners along. There are other kinds of stories, stories whose structure isn't as strict. But even more than narrative stories, they require luck in finding interviewees and compelling interviews. You can't rely on the overall plot to keep people listening so every moment of tape has to be pretty great.

Which is to say: There are other ways to make radio stories. This just happens to be the way we do it at our radio program.

Alex had a very different take on problem stories, based on his experience teaching at Columbia. He said a common problem his students run into is that they get seduced by the sound of things, by a kind of public radio documentary aesthetic. They think a good idea for a radio story is when they find an interviewee whose voice and delivery remind them of things they've already heard on public radio. If it sounds like one of those David Isay sound portrait stories where people are talking slowly and deliberately with a sincere sound in their voices, maybe in some sort of accent, the students focus on that sound more than on the actual content of what's being said. So they end up with pretty sounding tape that doesn't have a compelling story. At some point in the editing, they realize it's hard to put together, because all the material is just okay - nothing's great, nothing's terrible. There's no central story that just kills every time they hear it, that actually gets them excited. There's just a nice accent, plus meaningful pauses here and there.

Another problem: Alex's students often want to do a story about an artist, or a subculture, or they want to hang out in a subculture, without any ideas about that subculture that would give the story meaning or make it feel like it matters. They want to spend time with Hells Angels, or people who collect Beanie Babies, or ham radio operators, or knitters. But it's not enough to just visit with these people. The story has to have more in it than "here's what they do." They need to make up theories about the interviewees, Alex says, putting them in categories, comparing them with other things, attaching them to bigger ideas. They need to always be thinking "this is like this," "this means that," "this little thing is an example of this bigger thing." Especially "this little thing is an example of this bigger thing."

Some of his students get in trouble when their reason for doing a story is basically, that they just like the person in the story. One student wanted to do a story about a professor who had this theory the student found interesting. The professor said our problem today is that we have too much choice. We're paralyzed by choice. In the end, the theory was too eggheaded to work in the kind of interview and story the student was putting together. But it was hard for the student to see that. He wasn't objective about the story and what was working and what wasn't, because he liked the professor too much. It clouded his judgment about whether certain moments in the story were working.

Another student wanted to do a story about a Haitian-American artist in a Haitian-American artist collective. She did art that reflected her Haitian identity. Alex asked the student what interested her about the story. She said it was interesting that the artist was expressing her Haitian identity through her art. Alex asked the student if she really found that interesting. She said no. But it's the type of story you might hear on the radio. That's why she was attracted to it. She didn't think it was interesting, but she thought one was supposed to find it interesting. It was like the answer to a question on a test: What should

your public radio story be about? This one had art, culture and someone from a minority group. It was a triple threat.

Alex says this happens a lot. His students will pitch ideas and say that they're interested in them when really, they're not. They just think they're supposed to be interested in them.

He says the lesson they need to learn is not just to trust their instincts ... but also to know when they're telling themselves the truth about what they're feeling. A much better story pitch, he says, came from the student who declared that he wanted to find out how to become a major league umpire. All sorts of things make that a challenging story to put on radio, but at least it's motivated by a sincere feeling, a sincere desire to figure something out. He's not pretending to be interested in that subject; he's truly interested.

Finally, Alex says that beginners should abandon their ideas way quicker than they usually do. He says that understandably, because they haven't done many stories, they often blame themselves if a story isn't working. They try to make it work. They stick with it. They think it's their fault if they can't find the story in someone.

There's a myth that everyone has a story, Alex says. Everyone does have a story, sure, but it's not necessarily a story that should be told on the radio. It's important to know when there's nothing interesting, truly interesting, in your tape, and move on. This is where playing your tape for other people and getting an honest reaction can be really helpful. Killing your story is nothing to be ashamed of. I figure, if I'm not killing at least a third of the interviews I do for the radio show, we're not taking enough chances. Killing stories is just part of the process of finding great stories.

If one interview doesn't work, try another, and another. Follow the things that interest you and attract you. Amuse yourself. Keep getting more tape until luck kicks in.

Luck will always kick in.

Jay Allison - 08:06am Jun 21, 2004 EST (#142 of 146)

Useful or what!

What I like best about all this, Ira, is how really useful it is-- filled with parables and concrete tips and jokes all in the same graf. Even little sentences hiding in there are just so simple and honest (*"I just believed that there was something in this that I liked, and thought I could get better at. That's kind of dumb, but it's true."*) that they should give people courage and also show them something about writing for radio.

All of us at Transom thank you because you've been kickass guest, plus we'd like to mention that Ira, knowing Transom is financially strapped, did this all for free, which shows a real generous spirit and makes him even kickingassinger as a person.

by the way, Sydney Lewis is prepping the downloadable Transom Review which will be ready this week.

Sean Cole - 02:15pm Jun 21, 2004 EST (#143 of 146)

Management oversight by Jay Allison, who was overheard at a recent John Kerry campaign event, admonishing the candidate and his wife this way...

"I'm sorry Senator, but I only serve one master and it's called The Truth. And I'm sorry doll, I love you, I do, but there's only one thing in this world that's more important to me than you, and that's getting the story right. And if I ever changed that about myself, even for you sweetheart, than I wouldn't be the man you fell in love with in the first place, would I?"

Jackson - 10:26pm Jun 21, 2004 EST (#144 of 146)

There's a sign...

you'll often see in semi-rural locations on commercially-zoned land. "40 acres lease available, Will build to suit." Ira, my guess is that you are gone from here, but I hope you've signed up for the e-mail thingee that alerts you to a new post. That way, we'll get every last ounce of comment out of you.

Hunter/gatherers like myself build to suit: A story for, oh, the dearly-departed Savvy Traveller, that addresses the mission of the program. A piece for one of the news magazines that, lo and behold! is 3:30 in length! Coincidence? I think not.

TAL hints that the opposite might be true: If you build the great story, we will come. Still, in the main, we at TAL have ideas for our program, and if you find a way into those ideas -- in other words, if you are willing to build to suit -- you might hit our air.

No complaint: it's good to have an editorial policy.

But still: can you imagine a contemporary radio program that draws upon the broad range of stories currently being nurtured throughout the pubrad environment and yet that still follows the come-what-may aesthetic of early 70s FM programming?

Tommy Trussell - 01:32am Jun 22, 2004 EST (#145 of 146)

The COST of popularity

Back in message 128, Ira wrote:

The Audible downloads net the show about \$15,000 a year, which we split evenly with the contributors on those shows. The free RealAudio feeds cost WBEZ - simply for the bandwidth, not for the server or the webmaster or any other costs - over \$100,000 a year.

The figures here have really stuck with me. For one thing, it makes me feel guilty for using the RealAudio stream to play excerpts of favorite shows for my family and friends. I should have bought the Audible files so TAL and the producers can split that pittance rather than subsidizing me! I financially support my local station. I own an expensive computer. I cannot rightfully argue that I cannot afford an Audible download. (Especially now that they're in iTunes and the family owns a compatible computer I can't even argue the technical points that kept me away from Audible before.)

If Ira or others from TAL are still listening -- maybe you could somehow indicate on the TAL web site (right where you click to start the stream) how much it costs YOU to provide the shows online (either per stream or in aggregate). Maybe it will encourage more of us to consider Audible downloads. Also you might point out they're available via iTunes, which is a downright convenient way to buy and listen.

Ira Glass - 12:37pm Jul 4, 2004 EST (#146 of 146)

They're just about to close this board and turn it into a pdf, so I have no idea if this last set of answers will make it under the wire. Hopefully.

David - you wrote about our **Iraq contractors show**:

You mentioned in discussion the other day the fact that the show ran well over ten minutes long five hours before the feed. I'm curious to hear some details. Such as: how much tape did Updike actually record? Did she do the bulk of the production solo or, if not, how large of a collaboration was it? And finally, with the last minute trimdowns, is there anything you all removed that really hurt? If this were a DVD we were talking about, what would make the "deleted scenes" feature?

I think Nancy recorded 30 to 40 ninety-minute cassettes. She did all the reporting solo. Producer Sarah Koenig and I talked with her a lot before she went into Iraq about what to try to get, and Sarah helped her get access to the companies and their people, which was hard and time-consuming. Nancy taped for three weeks, including lots of people and scenes that didn't make it into the show. When she was still in Iraq, she'd call us now and then to talk about what she'd gotten and to brainstorm about what to get next, figure out what holes were still there, what questions needed answering.

As for the last-minute trimdowns, they were truly painful. The morning of the broadcast, with nine hours to go, we were still 17 minutes long. That's long enough that we faced the choice of killing an entire story or trimming to the bone on every story. We chose the latter and I'm still not sure that this made for the best show. Some things we got obsessed with keeping, in retrospect, could've gone ... like there's a woman in the Hank story who talks about convincing a guy to let his wife stop wearing a burqua (I'm sure I'm misspelling that). That was a late addition that seemed to reinforce something we were saying about Hank ... and the American presence ... and we didn't want to lose it. But it probably could've gone. We pulled out whole sections of Fluor and Karen and Jerry, sections that worked fine and probably helped those stories, but there was no time.

There's a guy Nancy met named Scott at the Fluor table at the hotel who we heard from in the longer version of the story, who she just mentions in the shorter. I was sorry to lose that. There's a whole extra section we had to cut of Jerry explaining - at length - all the problems they face in getting police trained. That was hard to lose.

After the show aired, we restored over eight minutes of that stuff, and if you buy the CD of the show, you get a 67 1/2-minute version. I think that's the version that'll go on the website as RealAudio at some point too.

Jackson - you wrote:

can you imagine a contemporary radio program that draws upon the broad range of stories currently being nurtured throughout the pubrad environment and yet that still follows the come-what-may aesthetic of early 70s FM programming?

Sure. In a sense, that's happening on WNYC with Jad Abumrad's **Radio Lab** or Jay Alison's Sunday night show on WCAI/WNAN where he plays old stories and stuff from PRX. Gwen Macsai just started a show like that at WBEZ in Chicago, called **Re: sound**. In all these shows, the hosts play stories the way an old FM dj would play songs, on a relaxed Sunday night.

Tommy - you wrote about our RealAudio and Audible deals:

It makes me feel guilty for using the RealAudio stream to play excerpts of favorite shows for my family and friends. I should have bought the Audible files so TAL and the producers can split that pittance rather than subsidizing me!

That's very kind of you to say, but we put the free shows up there so lots of people can have access to the program. No guilt!

If you'd like to help us pay for the RealAudio streaming, twice a year - during WBEZ's pledge drive - we put a little box on the site and you can click to donate, to help pay for the streaming you've used. We arranged with WBEZ that anyone who donates that way won't be put on the regular membership and mailing lists. It's just a straight-up donation (with premiums offered at higher level donations). Though of course if you're feeling VERY guilty, you can give to WBEZ anytime, at their [website](http://www.wbez.org/).

<http://www.chicagopublicradio.org/>

About Transom



What We're Trying To Do

Here's the short form: Transom.org is an experiment in channeling new work and voices to public radio through the Internet, and for discussing that work, and encouraging more. We've designed Transom.org as a performance space, an open editorial session, an audition stage, a library, and a hangout. Our purpose is to create a worthy Internet site and make public radio better.

Submissions can be stories, essays, home recordings, sound portraits, interviews, found sound, non-fiction pieces, audio art, whatever, as long as it's good listening. Material may be submitted by anyone, anywhere - by citizens with stories to tell, by radio producers trying new styles, by writers and artists wanting to experiment with radio.

We contract with Special Guests to come write about work here. We like this idea, because it 1) keeps the perspective changing so we're not stuck in one way of hearing, 2) lets us in on the thoughts of creative minds, and 3) fosters a critical and editorial dialog about radio work, a rare thing.

Our Discussion Boards give us a place to talk it all over. Occasionally, we award a Transom.org t-shirt to especially helpful users, and/or invite them to become Special Guests.

Staff

Producer/Editor - *Jay Allison*

Web Director/Designer - *Joshua T. Barlow*

Editors – *Sydney Lewis, Viki Merrick, Chelsea Merz, Jeff Towne, Helen Woodward*

Web Developers - *Josef Verbanac, Barrett Golding*

Advisors

Scott Carrier, Nikki Silva, Davia Nelson, Ira Glass, Doug Mitchell, Larry Massett, Sara Vowell, Skip Pizzi, Susan Stamberg, Flawn Williams, Paul Tough, Bruce Drake, Bill McKibben, Bob Lyons, Tony Kahn, Ellin O'Leary, Marita Rivero, Alex Chadwick, Claire Holman, Larry Josephson, Dmae Roberts, Dave Isay, Stacy Abramson, Gregg McVicar, Ellen Weiss, Ellen McDonnell, Robin White, Joe Richman, Steve Rowland, Johanna Zorn, Elizabeth Meister



ATLANTIC PUBLIC MEDIA

Atlantic Public Media administers Transom.org. APM is a non-profit organization based in Woods Hole, Massachusetts which has as its mission "to serve public broadcasting through training and mentorship, and through support for creative and experimental approaches to program production and distribution." APM is also the founding group for *WCAI & WNAN*, a new public radio service for Cape Cod, Martha's Vineyard, and Nantucket under the management of *WGBH-Boston*.

This project has received lead funding from the Florence and John Schumann Foundation. We receive additional funding from The National Endowment for the Arts.