



Alex Blumberg

About Alex Blumberg

Alex Blumberg is a producer for the public radio program *This American Life*. He has done radio documentaries on, among other things, the U.S. Navy, people who do impersonations of their mothers, and teenage Steve Forbes supporters. His story on clinical medical ethicists won the Public Radio News Directors Incorporated (PRNDI) award for best radio documentary.

Before he made the move to journalism at age 31, he was a middle school science teacher and basketball coach for four years. Highlights include 1995's electricity science fair when every student's hand-made, battery-powered electric motor actually worked, and teaching Michelle Ashley to shoot a lay-up. Before that, he was a settlement counselor for Russian refugees in Chicago. He has a B.A. from Oberlin College.



Intro from Jay Allison

We're trying something a little different. Our Guest this month is not only Alex Blumberg, but also his entire class of students at Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism.

Alex is a producer at *This American Life*, responsible for many great radio stories, and he's also a wonderful explainer (see his manifesto below). He and his class are setting up shop on Transom to sort out the basic, important stuff that somehow tends to get overlooked in radio journalism, like what makes a good story and what doesn't. They'll be posting the audio from their class assignments, and along with you, critiquing the process and the result.

We invite you to join us for this master class within a master class.

Alex Blumberg's Manifesto

The most embarrassing non love letter I ever sent was to the staff of *This American Life*. I sent it in 1997, and thankfully, it's been lost by now. Knowing how things worked around there in 1997, there's a high probability it was never read or even opened before becoming lost. But still, just thinking about it sends a flush up my neck. It was a pitch letter. And because I was trying to wow them, it contained not just one story idea, but maybe 10. They were all grouped thematically, with helpful suggestions for what to name the show they would fit into. And they all, I know now, sucked. The story pitch that makes me cringe the most was on community gardens in Chicago. Not A community garden, mind you. Community gardens in general, as a civic phenomenon. I don't remember what, if anything, I wanted to say about them, or who I wanted to interview about them, or even what I wanted to ask whoever I did find to interview. And I also don't remember why I possibly thought *This American Life* would want to devote any part of its hour on the air to a "story" without characters, ideas or conflict. But I do remember what I thought they should call the gardening-themed show that I thought my community garden story should go into. I thought they should call the show "Flowers from the Dead Earth." I thought this was a line from the *Wasteland*, a poem by T.S. Eliot which I'd never actually read, and which it turns out, I'd misquoted. Badly, actually. Eliot's wording was "lilacs out of the dead land," which means I'd gotten exactly two of his original six words right: "dead" and "the."

There are many lessons contained in this story, about the advisability of fact-checking, the danger of mixing pretension with ignorance, and the importance of trying, in some rudimentary way, to match the sensibility of the organization you're pitching to. For example, a casual browse through the *This American Life* archives should tell a person that lines from classics of modern American poetry don't ever become show titles. But for me, this story is mostly about how hard it is, when you're just starting out in radio, to figure out what, exactly, constitutes a story.

A big problem that a lot of radio beginners have is the problem I had with my pitch to *This American Life*: confusing a story setting or premise with an actual story. Community Garden is not a story. It's a setting, or maybe a topic to investigate, but to do a story on the radio about it, you need some specifics. And by that I mean, a character to talk to, and a situation to talk to them about. For example, maybe there's a Haitian immigrant who left his family back home until he can save up enough money to bring them to the US, and he gardens because it's the only place he can sort of imagine he's back home. Or maybe there's a community garden made up entirely of people who've never left their city neighborhoods, and then they went on a school trip to a farm and the were so impressed they decided to start their own garden when they got back home. Or maybe there's a community garden where there's an ongoing war between the flower people and the vegetable people. Or maybe there's a community

gardener who's just so unbelievably charming, or funny or fascinating that she can sustain a story just by pure force of personality.

For the last two years, I've taught a documentary radio class at the Columbia School of Journalism, and one of the first things we try to focus on in class is simply recognizing what's a story and what's not. This April and May my class and I will be taking on the guest-host helm. So before I continue, let me introduce my co-guest hosts:



They're all graduate students, mostly in the journalism school. And they're all learning, very quickly the proud teacher in me feels compelled to add, how to produce good radio stories.

You can tell a lot about whether something's a story entirely from the first question that occurs to you. And this is something that I try get my students to think about when considering a story idea. You're the reporter, you get your recorder together, go to the site of your story, find someone to interview, and what do you ask? It may seem basic, but I find it very helpful to think about, even today. Literally, what's the question that I want to answer, or the story I want to hear? If the questions seem obvious, chances are it's a story. For example, here are the main underlying questions posed by several story topics the students chose for their first pieces this semester:

How did you end up homeless on the streets and then how did you eventually get off the streets and into your job as a well-adjusted mental health professional?

What did you think about Israeli Jews before you went to the Arab/Israeli peace camp, and how did your thoughts change by being at the camp?

What exactly is the difference between punk rock karaoke and just plain old punk rock?

Wait, tell me again how you ended up making out in the dressing room with the internationally famous Senegalese pop star Youssou N'dour?

Now, these stories may or may not have completely succeeded in the end, but they all satisfy the most basic prerequisite. There's something to talk about. Let's compare that to the community garden story. You get to the community garden, you find a gardener, what do you ask? What are you growing? Boring answer. How long have you been gardening? Boring answer. Why do you garden? High probability of a boring answer -- probably something like "I feel peaceful out here in my community garden," or "can't beat the taste of a homegrown tomato," or "where I'm from, we garden a lot." Given the choice between the question suggested by a recent story in class, a story which you can hear below -- "What was it like to be a female pimp at age 16?" -- versus "How long have you been community gardening?" which story would you prefer?

Of course, satisfying that most basic prerequisite is just the first step. Just because something's a story, or takes the form of a story, doesn't mean it's an interesting story. And so the second thing I try to tell me students is, don't choose a story just because it sounds like a story you've heard before. In fact, just the opposite. Choose a story because it's surprising. So consider the homeless story idea above. It's very possible, even likely, that the answer to the question goes something like this: "I became homeless because I was addicted to heroin and then I got off the streets when I finally got treatment for my heroin addiction. Let me tell you all about my 12-step program ... " Now as person who's seen the benefits of 12-step programs on my own friends and family members, I am in no way commenting on their undeniable social benefit when I say that they do not make for very exciting radio. This is a story we've heard before. And it's not at all surprising.

Does this mean that my student shouldn't do the story about the homeless person? Not necessarily. Maybe there's a corner of the homeless person's story that isn't so familiar. It's worth poking around to see if there's something there.

I've developed a mathematical test to tell whether you're on the right track. It's called the "and what's interesting" test. You simply tell someone about the story you're doing,

adhering to a very strict formula: “I’m doing a story about X. And what’s interesting about it is Y.” So for example, again, taking the homeless story, “I’m doing a story about a homeless guy who lived on the streets for 10 years, and what’s interesting is, he didn’t get off the streets until he got into a treatment program.” Wrong track. Solve for a different Y.

Y = “... and what’s interesting is there’s a small part of him that misses being homeless.” Right track.

Y = “... and what’s interesting is, he developed surprising and heretofore unheard of policy recommendations on the problem of homelessness from his personal experience on the streets.” Right track.

Y = “... and what’s interesting is, he fell in love while homeless, and is haunted by that love still.” Right track.

Y = “... and what’s interesting is, he learned valuable and surprising life lessons while homeless, lessons he applies regularly in his current job as an account manager for Oppenheimer mutual funds.” Right track.

In other words, who the hell knows what you might find out. Just don’t settle for the story you already know. Find the exciting or surprising or unusual moment, and focus the story on that.

There are two things to keep in mind here. First of all, a lot of times, your subjects themselves will be trying to tell you the boring parts. Sometimes the boring part is the one they find the most exciting. And sometimes they think the boring part is the part they’re supposed to tell the person from the media. After all, they’re media consumers too, and they’ve heard the story the way it’s generally told, and they want to conform to that way of telling it. You’re allowed to stop them. You’re allowed to say, “actually, I don’t want to hear about the 12-step program, tell me about whether you ever had a relationship while you were homeless.” Or something. I tell my students to try and pay attention to their own boredom. We public radio people are so used to being interested and curious about everything. And that’s good. But if you, a person with boundless natural curiosity about the world, are even slightly bored listening to someone talk, chances are the listeners will turn off the radio.

The second thing is a naive and dangerous belief of beginning public radio producers everywhere, the idealistic notion that everyone has a story, and a skillful public radio producer can bring that story to life and make it sing on the radio. I would agree that everyone has a story, but it’s not always that interesting a story, or one that they’re particularly adept at telling ~ in other words, one that millions of people need to hear on their radios. If you want to do a story about the formerly homeless, and you’re interviewing a person who can’t tell you anything interesting or remember any good

stories, find another formerly homeless person. I mean, give it the old college try. But don't be afraid to give up and move on. I audition people for my stories all the time. And the difference between someone who's a very compelling and honest narrator of their own experience, and someone who's not that articulate about it is huge.

So, now you know basically what my students did, when they completed the first assignment in my class, a 4 to 6 minute profile. Students chose their own subjects.

The first story, a profile of a rare book dealer, produced by Mara Altman, is interesting in that it breaks, basically, all the rules I've outlined above, and yet, somehow, still works.

Listen to Mara's Story – 5:10

http://www.transom.org/sounds/2005/guests/alex_blumberg/20050407.altman.ramer.mp3

The second story, by Theresa Bradley, is a perfect example of a story that at first blush might seem a little familiar, but then becomes very surprising.

Listen to Theresa's Story – 6:41

http://www.transom.org/sounds/2005/guests/alex_blumberg/20050407.bradley.kaltenbach.mp3

The third story, by Nazanin Rafsanjani, started out as an investigation of people trying to live on minimum wage. As Nazanin was talking to her subject, Evelyn Camargo, they got to talking about other jobs Evelyn had had. And that's when they stumbled onto the subject that Nazanin focuses her profile on.

Listen to Nazanin's Story – 6:41

http://www.transom.org/sounds/2005/guests/alex_blumberg/20050407.rafsanjani.camargo.mp3

My students and I will be back with more to say about these stories, other stories in the class, and radio in general. But for now, we'd love to hear what you think about their work so far.

A Conversation w/ Alex Blumberg & His Class

Bente Hamel - *April 18, 2005 - #3*

While reading your remarks on storytelling, Alex, I'm thinking about the time when I was making lots and lots of short features for a local Amsterdam radio station. I would go out without hardly any preparation (no time for that-2 shows a day!) and just follow my nose to see if I would bump into something: a festival, an interesting person, whatever. Most of the time the items weren't very interesting (that's no surprise ..) but every once in a while I would stumble upon this little pearl; this really nice story!

Now that I make longer and more prepared programs, I don't get surprised that often any more, simply because I'm not out on the street, randomly interviewing people. When I go out to interview I know what I want to hear. I feel it's harder now to stay open for the surprise-element.

I listened to Theresa's story, very funny! Don't people always call in the wrong moment. Mara's story I tried to play but I can't hear the book salesman .. his voice seems to distort.

Alex Blumberg - *April 25, 2005 - #6*

I agree, I miss the feeling of being out in the world, randomly talking to people. And I feel that when you do narrative for a living, like I do now, you don't have as much time to go down unknown streets in the hope that they'll lead you somewhere interesting. I did that a lot when I was freelancing, and it led me to some really good stories. Which is part of the reason that i teach my class. My students, when they graduate, will be out there, poking around, uncovering interesting corners of the world, following their curiosity in a way that i don't have as much time to do anymore. If they find something good, then I hope they'll call me, and we can put it on the radio.

But I wouldn't want to say that a story whose outlines you know can't still surprise you. In fact, I'm often surprised and delighted reporting stories the beats of which i already know. Sometimes a new fact emerges. Sometimes a person draws an original lesson or undergoes a surprising transformation. Often, two people who've had the same experience can have surprisingly different accounts of it. In fact, I think that might be one definition of a good story idea: it has the capacity to surprise you even if you know the facts of it.

One recent example comes to mind, a show we did recently called Mind Games. The first story, about a young New Yorker who runs a group called Improv Everywhere that does these surreal performances around New York with the goal of making the world seem strange and slightly enchanted. One of his events (he calls them missions) was to give an unknown band its greatest gig ever. He found a new band, playing in New York for the first time in a horrible Sunday-night time slot, and he recruited a bunch of people to come to the show and pretend to be fans. They learned all the bands songs, and showed up at the show and acted like they were the Beatles. The band got really into it, as did the members of Improv Everywhere.

The band found out a couple days later though, and then they went through a complicated couple of days trying to sort it out. So going into our interviews with the band and with Improv Everywhere, we knew the facts of the show, we knew what happened, but there was still plenty of room for surprise in how the various parties interpreted what happened to them. And in fact, the guitarist for the band, Chris Partyka, had a response to the Improv Everywhere mission that surprised me quite a bit when he first talked about it, and in the end, formed the emotional core to the whole story.

Melissa Robbins - *April 19, 2005 - #4*

...Loved the three profiles- some really nice writing all around. I was particularly moved by the line in Nazanin's story, when she writes:

"Sometimes, Evelyn says, she feels like she's going to breakdown, but she's learned that for her, there's no there to pick up the pieces."

Nazanin portrayed Evelyn in such a straightforward way that she held my sympathy from the beginning. But that line...I felt almost suffocated right along with her.

I was also drawn into Theresa's story, and I think the focus on phone calls from home was a nice turn. If anything, though, I might have wanted to hear a little more about specifically how and why: "war gives him a kind of peace, while real stress comes from home"

I think she's really onto something there, and I would have loved to go one level deeper with that.

Sydney Lewis - *April 21, 2005 - #5*

I just listened to all three and like Melissa am happy to find some good writing throughout.

First reactions: Mara's piece was hard to make out. The book dealer's voice wasn't clear in my ear. I'm pathologically averse to shoving a microphone right up in a person's face, but you gotta do it. That may have been one problem. Some limiter or compression tweaking might have helped. I'm not sophisticated enough to know. I just know it frustrated. As for content, I loved the moments when he veered off the business and onto his size, rummaging around to impress the young woman with a "thin" photo. Also when he sang "April Showers." These human-rich moments perked me up.

Theresa's piece had good surprises, and I liked the sense I got of him as a person. It would have been interesting to hear him elaborate a little on his home avoidance feelings, but I'm guessing maybe he just wouldn't go there. I like that what we did hear subtly illuminated aspects of the guy's persona enough for me to imagine what causes his home stress. I took the piece and went off on my own with it, which is satisfying in its own way.

Nazanin's piece is strong. She found an interesting person with a strong audio voice who is reflective and has a compelling narrative, and Nazanin chose good tape and paced it well. We pay attention. We have to.

Alex Blumberg - *April 25, 2005 - #7*

As Sydney and Bente noted, the audio on Mara's piece is a little messed up. Her actualities are hard to hear. I think they were just loaded into the computer low. We're trying to get that straightened out. But it's a good lesson in how production problems can ruin great tape. The less you can hear the nuance in a person's voice, the less likely that voice is to connect with you.

Jackson Braider - *April 26, 2005 - #8*

I am going to beg to differ about "production problems can ruin great tape." We live in the digital age. We have tools at our disposal that can make good better. My point: Great tape simply is great tape, regardless of the acoustics of any given moment: Congrats to Mara for finding such an incredible guy and getting him to talk into a recorder of any kind. Part of our task in post production is simply to reveal the tape's greatness by any means necessary. Levels would help with Bruce, certainly, and we could (and should) fiddle with EQ when needs arise.

And in that sense, I would disagree with Sydney as well. Of course we can always do better getting quality sound, but I kind of like the unmitigated sound of Bruce's voice. In a pristine world, this audio, warts and all, sounds refreshingly natural...

Jackson Braider - *April 26, 2005* - #9

Having done more than my share of tape syncs -- think of those as location shoots -- I have started to feel that we in radio often want to lose the sense of a particular environment when we get people to talk on tape. In the current scheme, a teacher in a classroom can sound like a bus driver on his bus can sound like the call center serf in the call center cell. Sure, we'll get a brake squeal here or a chalk scratch there, but somewhere between the shotgun mic and the noise gate, the voice itself that we collect sounds nowhere in particular.

In the ideal radio world -- and please correct me if I'm wrong -- it seems as if we're trying to capture voices in virtual recording environments, without real regard as to where people live, work, eat or sleep. We try to fix all this in the mix with ambient tape, but really, do we need to be so clean, so **antiseptic**?

Sydney Lewis - *April 27, 2005* - #10

I don't mind rough sound, I don't mind audio contributions from the environment. I do appreciate being able to hear the words. There were times during Mara's piece when my nothing-special computer speakers, turned way up, could not compensate for what was on the tape. I loved the book guy and wanted to hear what he said. That seemed to be the point. Unless it was an artistic decision to have him in moments be difficult to hear.

Jackson Braider - *April 27, 2005* - #11

Sydney -- It's not that I disagree with you (hey, Alex, you can jump into this any time), but the tape we get is the tape of the fact. Intelligible tape is a wonderful goal to aspire to, but there are also strategies for dealing with almost unintelligible tape as well -- not that Bruce ever really approaches pure garble.

I'm thinking, for example, of a moment in a piece by Sean Cole (found on PRX, part of the Inside Out series), where he voices everything people are saying under him. He probably did get everything cleanly, but it's a strategy for an audio/sonic challenge like Mara's (think translation).

That, of course, leads to an entirely different set of questions and issues: Is the narrative voice omni-anything? Omnipresent? Omniscient? Or is it just one of the characters in the piece? I think Sean's voice over in his piece is actually the voice of moderator (in the grandest sense of the term) standing between us listeners and the families of the Massachusetts reservoir.

Which leads me to ask a question to Mara: When you were interviewing Bruce, did you worry that thrusting a mic in his face would influence the mood?

Alex Blumberg - *April 28, 2005 - #14*

I'm of the impression that actualities should be audible. I agree that good tape is good tape, and a good phoner will work, if an ISDN or tape sync is not available. But I'd say that if the phoner is good, the tape sync would have been better. I don't think anything is ever ADDED by lowering the sound quality. If what you're trying to capture is a person's disheveled, doddering quality, then the better you can hear that person's muttering and fidgeting, the better that quality will come through on the radio. And so yes, I do believe that production values matter. And lots of hiss, or over-modulated levels, or weird phase problems can affect the listening experience, and cause people to miss the thing that you want them to hear.

I will say, though, that occasionally people fetishize sound quality, to the point where it becomes more important than content quality. So if there's a killer interview on the phone, and a so-so interview, recorded with perfect fidelity on the latest Sennheiser fancypants, I'd got with the phoner every time.

All that having been said, I think I figured out what the problem was with Mara's actualities. Her first story was perhaps not perfectly mastered, and so her voice tracks were several dB louder than the actualities, over the long process of rolling off and bouncing and converting that led to her piece being up on the internet, that level discrepancy grew larger and larger. This is my theory at least. So his actualities sounded even muddier and softer than they did when we first listened to her piece in class, where they just sounded quieter than Mara's narration, but certainly audible.

davy rothbart - *April 28, 2005 - #12*

it was a treat to hear all 3 pieces - i thought they were so vividly drawn. the narration all seemed really natural - it was clear on a 2nd listen how much thought had gone into it, yet when you're listening, it never felt overly scripted.

... here's one trick i've learned when i feel shy about thrusting my mic all up in someone's face -- before an interview, i explain how the mic works and where i'm going to keep it placed, that i'll keep it a couple inches below their mouth so the blast of air from their speech won't blast the mic. and i ask them to look at me and talk to me like normal, otherwise folks try to crane their neck down to try and talk into the mic at their chin. somehow, just talking about mic placement with them for a minute makes them more comfortable with having it in their face the whole time... even for the most mic-shy.

thought alex's "and what's interesting..." test is pretty, well... interesting. and no doubt effective. right now i'm working on logging tape from sri lanka for a story about the tsunami, and what i'm struggling with is that so much of it feels interesting to me. i'm trying to identify the most powerful moments of tape, but when you've spent intense time with someone, you get really attached to them as people and just about anything they're talking about seems funny or poignant. it's hard to get distance from your subject and get a sense of what would be interesting to an outside listener. do other people struggle with this? i wonder if alex's students are dealing with any of these things as they work on their longer final pieces.

Alex Blumberg - *April 28, 2005 - #16*

I totally know that feeling of being overwhelmed by good tape. What I do is just play it for people. Or tell it to them. Or when I'm out for a drink with someone, tell them some of the stories I've been logging and watch to see if their eyes are glazing over. But the important thing is, if you feel too close to the tape, find someone who won't, and get them to listen. Remember, a key element of the "what's interesting" test is saying it out loud to another person.

And it's important not to feel stupid because you can't separate yourself from the tape. That's what your editors are for (even if they sometimes don't e-mail you back so promptly. Sorry.) Every story I've ever done, I've come to a point where I have a bunch of things that I think are interesting, and then I need to bring another person in and talk it through with him or her. One of the best pieces of advice I ever got early in my career was to use my editor. If you're stuck, it's okay to just call someone up and say, "can i play this for you and you tell me if it's interesting?" Often, just the act of playing it aloud for someone else will answer the question for you. It's much better to do that than to sit and wrestle with it over and over by yourself.

David Kestenbaum - *April 28, 2005 - #13*

...wanted to ask if you'd given any thought to how this kind of storytelling fits in with how we usually cover news stories. usually we try to put the main point in the intro - which is kind of narrative suicide in a way because you'd like the story to build to some surprising or dramatic peak. i mean if nina totenberg were reporting on a supreme court finding she could theoretically not give away how the case came out in the intro and build toward it, i'm sure people would stay with it to find out what happened. but our listeners would come and burn down the npr building here. why should they wait to get their news? i feel like even in sports reporting on TV they usually let you know who won.. then just go into how they won, though now upon reflection i think maybe that's not so.

anyway i'm always torn - trying to find some way to leave something surprising for the story itself while not making the introduction an annoying tease. i try to maybe give the conclusion but leave you wondering how the hell it happened. but it's hard.

feel like on This American Life sometimes you give away the punchline in the intro, sometimes not. do you have any instructive examples of stories where you struggled with how to handle this and how you resolved things?

Alex Blumberg - *April 28, 2005 - #15*

Geez Dave, can't you think up any easier questions? I guess I feel like in some ways, news stories are just structured differently. The burden isn't so much on the narrative, since news (at least ideally) is by definition new, and therefore should be surprising. When you're doing stories, like the ones we do a lot, about normal(ish) people in relatively normal situations, then you have to do much more work to give people a reason to listen, and that's why we rely so heavily on narrative pull.

That having been said, I think a lot of news stories don't feel new. They follow very familiar scripts. Politician a says new initiative x will help, and politician b says, no, politician a is insane, and new initiative x will lead only to ruin and disaster, except for politician a's well-connected cronies... That's the way it feels to me a lot, anyway. When I feel disengaged from a news story, it's because it feels like it's following a form I've heard before. Two people arguing about social security reform, for example. that's a story I've heard. In fact, that's the story I mathematically diagrammed above. But social security reform is undeniably new. so the stories i like about social security reform are the ones that actually tell me what's the actual new thing that's going on here. what will actually change, who will actually be affected. Etc.

I don't know. I'm not sure if that's helpful. the fact is, it's hard to find surprising things all the time. Especially on a daily basis. and as for giving away the punchline, what do you mean by that exactly?

David Kestenbaum - *May 3, 2005 - #19*

... By 'giving away the punchline' I mean revealing what happens in the first sentence or two. It's the beauty and the tragedy of the inverted pyramid. Sometimes I notice you guys do it just to get people hooked...I was just wondering if you had come up with any insights as to how much you give away at the start, though I suppose your answer will be that it depends and sometimes you have to do it to push things along.

Anyway I looked over the front page of the new york times last week. And you're right. The engine that drives most news stories is that the news poses questions which then get answered in the piece. (Example: "North Korea tested a two stage missile for the

first time yesterday, U.S. officials said.” Now you keep reading because you want to know CAN THEY REACH US? And WHAT IS BUSH GOING TO DO? Etc. etc.) But here is a counter-example.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/29/arts/design/29scis.html?>

It’s a story about Christie’s and Sotheby’s playing rock-paper-scissors for the right to auction \$20 million of art. And they don’t give away who wins until the end. The lede is “It may have been the most expensive game of rock, paper, scissors ever played. “ and not “Christies wins \$20M auction rites by picking scissors over paper.” Or whatever. Here are some examples of news stories on NPR that manage to leave the surprising bit for later in the story.

“Yesterday’s congressional hearing on steroids and baseball reminded some people of an extra inning game. Lawmakers questioned players and officials for more than 11 hours. The hearing didn’t add much to what’s already known about steroid use, but there was plenty of drama in what the players said and in what one of them declined to say. Here’s NPR’s Tom Goldman.”

“Imagine you are being chased by a tyrannosaurs rex. Six tons of muscle.. and teeth.... All propelled on just two legs. Could you... outrun it? A pair of scientists have used computers to come up with AN answer. Their work is reported in the current issue of the Journal Nature. NPR’s David Kestenbaum reports.”

The problem is you can’t do this all the time. But when a story begins “The Federal reserve raised interest rates today.” I’m not likely to keep listening. I’ve just heard all I needed to know.

I just thought of a funny exercise, which would be to take all the this American life stories and murder them by writing them as AP style news stories.

kimberly kinchen - *May 4, 2005 - #20*

...I think the marketplace morning report is brilliant not so much as posing particular questions, but at making the listener ask the same question after the intro - "What?" And it's the kind of "what" that makes you want to get an answer. I'm pretty much assured that at 6:50 any given morning, whatever Kai Ryssdal says to intro the show is going to make me ask that. And that show does it in a different way, in that those quick intros never really tell you what the lead story is about, it really just befuddles you enough to make you keep listening. Last week it was: "The \$251 gorilla gets a face lift," about the rising stock of google and its revamping the way it does ads; yesterday it was "A big personal problem for Time Warner," about TW loosing a bunch of its employees social security numbers, and other private info. They're news stories and they are very

short, so that's different than what we're trying to do here, in a way, but they tend not to give away punchlines...I guess I'm just trying to say, I don't think there always has to be an explicit question up front, but something has to make people ask that "what"?

jane feltes - *May 4, 2005* - #21

i sorta had to do this 2 weeks ago for a story about this girl Dawna who got a part-time job at a sub shop and, in a matter of weeks, ended up running the place (kinda into the ground) after the bosses abandoned it. (that was pretty much ira's intro). i think the reveal was necessary in that story because it gave the audience a reason to listen to what otherwise could be a boring first few minutes: a girl talking about making subs part-time. also, even though we know what events will take place, we're still curious to know how she handled them, how they changed her life, just how she felt about it...

Anaheed Alani - *May 5, 2005* - #22

...I think in the example you're talking about the interesting question isn't "So did she stay at the store?" but rather HOW and WHY did she stay at the store? You know? So you're still not answering the big question in the lede.

Jackson Braider - *May 6, 2005* - #23

Jane's piece is a classic example. There are possibly four or five stories there -- the Marketplace take, the what-do-you-want-to-be-when-you-grow-up take, the TAL sticking-to-it-in-spite-of-everything take, the what-do-we-have-here take, the macro take, the micro take...

Steve Zelaznik - *May 6, 2005* - #25

I'm based in Madison, WI where I cover local news for our community station, WORT. I have found that my stories become the most interesting when I cover the behind the scenes actions around any given legislation.

When Madison decided to raise the minimum wage, I obviously gave away the ending to the story.

"Well Madison has become the fourth city in the country with a local minimum wage. The common council voted 12-8 last night to raise the minimum wage from \$5.15/hr to \$7.75 by the year 2008. As Steve Zelaznik reports the council's decision was the result of a year long grassroots effort."

https://mywebspaces.wisc.edu/skzelaznik/web/audio/minimum_wage_wrap2.mp3

Then I went back and documented the actions to get to the city council vote, and still provided diverse opinions on whether this new law was a good idea.

More recently the Wisconsin State Assembly fast tracked two bills to relax environmental regulation for business. Much of the public was unaware of the bills until they made it out of committee.

The bills were complicated enough to understand, but I provided an audio snapshot, of how quickly these bills were railroaded through, to the dismay of Democrats and many individual citizens.

But it still seems my failures surpass my success stories. Perhaps the This American Life show on Washington Irving Elementary is the best recent example of how to make a riveting story out of a complex local issue.

Rene Gutel - *May 11, 2005 - #27*

Rather than rewriting TAL stories into AP style, I'd like to see AP stories rewritten by TAL, given the caveat that they must be told in under three minutes. Cause that's what we're working with, the time constraints...

The trouble I often have is trying to find and tell compelling stories that are about people. I have a knack for unearthing the cool tales about buildings, about historic oddities, about strange new books and their theories, but it's the human element, the character development that I want to improve on. The three stories Alex posted above were interesting because they were little human snapshots. How to incorporate that approach into more typical daily storytelling?

Alex Blumberg - *May 15, 2005 - #29*

... I'd like to see AP stories rewritten by TAL, given the caveat that they must be told in under three minutes. Cause that's what we're working with, the time constraints.

I agree. It's much easier when you have the time, both on the radio, and during the week to research, to come up with strong narrative driven stories. and even then it's hard. We have a fleet of 7 producers working long days and we can barely come up with an hour of material a week. And the truth is, I don't want to have every AP story written like a TAL story. If the facts are news, then just the facts are usually enough to keep us interested for 3 minutes.

That having been said, I think Steve Zelaznik was right to try and dig for the story behind the news...But I agree, if you can get the story of how the news came to be made, that's a good story.

Jay Allison - May 15, 2005 - #30

Alex, I'm not sure if this is a question or not... when I began in radio, it was a little like your Community Gardens era, except even less narrative-driven because, as an independent producer (whatever that was), you didn't have to pitch someone on the idea you had a good story in mind, but you just went out with your tape recorder to see what happened. (In public radio in the 70s and 80s there was more airtime than good programming so you could get away with a lot of "experiments." Like the Internet now.)

In fact, the whole appeal for me was just going out with my tape recorder to see what happened. I had no story theory. An interest in the basic subject was enough. The whole idea was to find the story, to follow the tape, to be open and curious.

If I'd had to answer a lot of the story questions in advance, I'd not have gone out on 90% of the pieces I did.

Sometimes, the pieces ended up not being stories at all, but became found poems or montages or illustrated essays or little art pieces.

Sometimes the tape would sit on the shelf for months or years until it finally proclaimed what it was about.

Sometimes characters from one piece would start talking to characters from another piece and I'd bring them together.

There was never any way to know, or even guess, in advance. It was all a surprise.

The bad part was that a lot of time was wasted and a lot of stories were tepid. I wish I'd had the benefit of the kind of story analysis that's in this very topic. I'd have gotten better material in the field.

The good part was that there were discoveries of things I had no idea even to look for. In fact, that's what I'd like to hear more of on public radio: the real wild card, the story no one could ever have thought of in advance.

I know, as you said, it comes down to time. Who has the time now for this kind of gamble? Younger people might. Artists might. And Transom would like to be a home for the result....

Anaheed Alani - *May 18, 2005* - #31

...I think it can work to go into a situation with no idea of what the "story" is, so long as you have a basic level of curiosity--something you're dying to find out about, some question you need answered.

Jay Allison - *May 18, 2005* - #32

You're right of course.

Traveling around as a budding producer talking to everyone, I think the question I wanted answered was, "Hey, what's your life like?"

The advantage of youth is that you really don't know.

And the illusion of age is that you think you do.

David Kestenbaum - *May 26, 2005* - #36

I was talking with Jay Kernis here who thinks a lot about these things and he said he felt sometimes our introductions were too mysterious. (or trying too hard to be mysterious?) he said he felt the general format should be that you give people the headline, and they keep listening because they want to know how the heck that happened.

maybe the thing i'm feeling with a lot of news stories is that after the introduction i'm not really left with any questions. sometimes i hear it and think - oh good, i don't have to pay attention to this one, i can brush my teeth. and that's our fault for not picking the stories better, or finding a better angle.

richard harris here did an interesting story the other day about a blind biologist where you don't figure out that the guy is blind until about 2 minutes in which is a nice idea. though i have to wonder if we would have done the piece if there were not that added element in which case i wonder if the top is interesting enough without mentioning it.

here's a link:

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4665906>

Manifesto Part 2: The Addendum

At this late date, now that Manifesto, part 1 is finished and I'm considering what to write in part 2, I finally figured out what I'm here to talk about. I'm here to talk about two very important, but often overlooked elements of radio journalism. The subject of manifesto part one was how to choose a good radio story. The subject of today's little manifesto, (in Italian, manifestissimo,) is how to conduct a good radio interview.

I feel the need to point out that there a billion more things to say about putting together a good radio story. There's writing, structuring, pacing. But those are the aspects of radio production that everyone talks about. What they don't talk about are the two things that come first.

To do a good radio interview, it's helpful to know what you're going for. I'd argue there are two main kinds of tape you're trying to get. The first is emotionally honest tape. In tape like this, what the person is saying is secondary to the emotional tone they say it with. Here's a prime example:

Spelling Bee

(NPR's *Morning Edition* - 05/30/1997)

<http://www.transom.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1028758>

Let's just say, we're not listening to this story because we're curious how the word is spelled.

Emotionally honest tape doesn't need to be overwrought though. It can simply be honest. Honesty is very audible on the radio. You can hear when someone is saying something they really feel, and you can hear when someone's giving you a canned response. The most vivid tape is tape where you hear people saying something they really, really mean. Here's another example of tape like this, from an interview Columbia graduate Anya Bourg did, for a show on *This American Life* called "DIY." The story involved a wrongfully convicted man, Collin Warner, who was finally released from prison after 21 years, thanks to the tireless efforts of two men: his loyal friend from childhood, and a small-time lawyer in Brooklyn. In the interview we ask the lawyer if this type of wrongful conviction could happen again. His answer ... well, it's not the most groundbreaking information in the world, but the way he says it, it just stands out:

Listen to Anya Bourg's Story – 1:00

http://www.transom.org/sounds/2005/guests/alex_blumberg/200506.robdee_cut.mp3

The second type of tape that you're going for is tape that takes the form of an anecdote. The anecdote is the fundamental building block of good radio journalism. An

anecdote is at its most basic, a sequence of actions that arrives at some point or conclusion or surprising revelation. We tell anecdotes to each other all the time, every day. "This morning as I was leaving my house on my way to work I heard these strange sounds. They were high-pitched, and chirpy, like a baby animal or something. When I went outside the sound got louder, it sounded like it was coming from under the porch. I bent down and saw a litter of kittens. An alley cat had given birth there during the night."

There are two kinds of people in the world. People who talk in anecdotes and people who don't. The people who don't wouldn't tell that story that way. They wouldn't tell that story at all, in fact. They'd simply convey the information contained in that story, "Some alley cat gave birth to a litter of kittens under my porch last night. I heard them on my way to work this morning." Now don't get me wrong, some of my best friends don't tell anecdotes, but on the radio you want an anecdote-teller every time. The reason is, we're hardwired to listen to stories. And if you can get the information delivered in an anecdote, people will pay more attention.

Consider the following example. You need to know two things before listening:

- 1) the guy telling the story is from a working-class town in upstate New York, and was the first one in his family to go to college, and not just any college, an Ivy League school, Cornell University.
- 2) He and his entire family loved to eat meat.

The story takes place early in his freshman year, he'd just arrived, was nervous, didn't know anyone, and wasn't sure he belonged:

Listen to the Freshman Year Story – 1:57

http://www.transom.org/sounds//2005/guests/alex_blumberg/200506.vegetarian_cut1.mp3

Once you get past a certain point in the story, you're not turning off the radio until it's over. That's the power of the anecdote. It conveys lots of information - about the dislocation of freshman year, about the absurd lengths people go to fit in - but in a way that makes you want to listen. Imagine if the tape had simply been this: "yeah, in my freshman year of college, I was so nervous about fitting in that I told people I was a vegetarian." It's the same information, but not told in a radio friendly way.

The thing people don't realize is that this radio friendly tape doesn't just happen. Well, sometimes it does, actually. Some people are born story-tellers, and speak in anecdotes as a matter of course. And other people are irrepressibly heartfelt and emotional talkers who open up to people with microphones the same way they do with their friends and family. But most people, the vast majority of us, need help. And you as a radio reporter need to realize that one of your biggest jobs is to help the people you're

interviewing become good tape, which means 1) helping them talk honestly and emotionally, ie. like real people, and 2) helping them tell good anecdotes.

I. Helping people talk like real people

Let me begin with an anecdote. When I first started doing radio, I thought that in order to build rapport with my subjects, I should spend 5 or 10 minutes chitchatting with them, off the topic of what I was there to interview them about. But every time it seemed that at the end of the chitchat my subjects were more nervous, not less. I finally figured out why. It was because I wasn't putting them at ease with my chitchat. Quite the opposite, I was confusing them. From my perspective I was just being, you know, casual, but from their perspective a stranger called them me up out of the blue, scheduled an appointment to talk with them, dragged his tape recorder all the way up to their office, just to ask them where's the best place to get lunch in the area?

In other words, you're fooling no one. You're there to do a job, and the sooner you acknowledge it, the better it will go. Don't pussyfoot. Take control. If they're sitting across a desk, make them sit next to you. If their phone is ringing see if they can turn it off. Never ever, ever, ever, ever let them hold the microphone. It does NOT make them feel more comfortable. And it just insures that you'll get mic noise. The more certain you are in your behavior, the more comfortable and relaxed they'll be in the interview. The weird thing is, once you've bossed them around enough in the beginning - made them switch seats, turn off their cell phones, scootch closer so you don't have to hold the mic way out; in short, all the things you'd wouldn't do if you were just talking - the more it will sound like a natural conversation in the end. People do forget about the microphone, almost immediately, but only if you acknowledge it in the beginning.

The other very important thing to remember: if they don't say something the right way the first time, you can go back. People will be stiff. They'll stumble around. They'll talk all formal, like they think you want them to talk. They'll say "this individual" instead of "this guy." They'll say, "I was concerned, definitely" instead of "I was freaked out, yo." You don't have to let them. Get them to tell it again. Rephrase the question. Stop them and say, "I want you to answer that question again, but this time use the word sad instead of lachrymose."

How much can you do this? A lot. Witness this tape from an interview NPR reporter John Nielsen did for a story about Avian flu in zoos. During an outbreak, people were afraid to go to zoos because they thought, wrongly, there was a higher risk of catching the disease in a zoo. Nielsen's interviewing a zoo director, and he just needs the guy to set the record straight, say that zoos actually aren't any more dangerous than anywhere else. But the guy's a scientist type and isn't talking like a real person. We'll

pick up the tape after John's asked the question a second time, why is it safe to go to the zoo?

Listen to John Nielson's Story – 1:36

http://www.transom.org/sounds/2005/guests/alex_blumberg/200506.john_nielsen_cut1.mp3

Notice, he's never mean or rude or off-putting. And that's very important. By bossing people around, I don't want to give the impression that you should march into people's offices after they've generously agreed to give you time out of their busy day and start making petty demands. But simply to realize what they already understand, you're there to do a job, and to do it right, you need them to follow your lead. You can hear John's final piece here:

Zoos Tracking West Nile Virus

(NPR's *Morning Edition* - 10/02/2002)

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1150958>

The zoo guy comes in at the very end.

II. Getting people to talk in stories

I did a story a while back about a mailman in Chicago. I spent a day on his route with him. It was in a working class neighborhood in Chicago, relatively high crime, and there were a lot of drug dealers around. The mailman, Henry, had a very complicated relationship with them. On the one hand, he was afraid of them, because they were federal felons with guns and he was a federal employee with nothing but mace. He was afraid to even call them drug dealers on tape, he called them boys in the hood, or businessmen instead. On the other hand, he saw the same guys hanging around the same corner every day, and since they were both working the same neighborhood, they'd developed a somewhat collegial respect for one another. I wanted to get across in my story this peculiar and complicated relationship. So I put in this anecdote:

Listen to Henry's Story – 1:57

http://www.transom.org/sounds/2005/guests/alex_blumberg/200506.henry_cut.mp3

Henry was a wonderful man, and I loved spending the day with him, but he was not an anecdote teller. And the story you just heard did not happen the way you heard it. To prove it, I'm going to play you the raw tape of the way he first told me about this episode. There are two things to pay attention to here. First, the climax of the story, that the boys in the hood came to Henry's aid, is the very first beat Henry gets to in his uncut telling of the story. This is a classic move with non anecdote tellers. They tell you the point, and then fill in the details later. For a good story, you want the details first, and then the point at the end. So a lot of what I do in the raw tape is get him to back up

and fill in the details of the scene. One of the most helpful things my boss, Ira, ever told me was this: you know you're getting good tape when people are quoting dialog to you. You can hear me prompting Henry, "then he said what? Then what did you say back?"

The second thing to listen for in the raw tape is how the story Henry wants to tell me is totally different from the story I WANT Henry to tell me. I want him to tell the story about what happened that day with his angry customer. He wants to tell me a story about proper procedure for submitting a change of address card. Henry was a very, very good mailman, and this part of the story was interesting to him. But it's not interesting to me, and since I'm the professional journalist in the equation, part of my job is being a proxy for the rest of the people listening, and that means, if I'm good at my job, what's interesting to me is what's interesting to my listeners. Anyway, here's the tape the way it actually happened:

Listen to Henry's Story Uncut – 1:57

http://www.transom.org/sounds/2005/guests/alex_blumberg/200506.henry_uncut.mp3

This story, which ended up being sort of pivotal in the final piece, wouldn't have happened at all if I hadn't been on the look-out for something to turn into an anecdote. And I think that's one of the most important things of all to remember. A lot of what you're doing during a radio interview is simply picking the moments you want to make into stories. So always be on the lookout for moments that seem somehow meaningful, or poignant, or pivotal. And when they come up, make sure you get the details.

Okay, now it's my students' turn. The semester has ended, most of the students have graduated and, we hope, entered the work force. Their final projects are all up on the web.

Columbia Student's Final Projects

<http://www.jrn.columbia.edu/studentwork/radio/documentary/2005/index.asp>

There's hours of material here, but I'd point people, for the purposes of discussion, to a couple of the pieces in particular:

Jennifer Weiss does a fantastic job exploring the world of platza, a spa treatment in New York City's Russian bathhouses:

Listen to Jennifer Weiss' Story – 10:25

<http://streaming.jrn.columbia.edu:8080/ramgen/radio/documentary2005/weiss.rm?start=00:00:03>

Kristen Gillespie tackles a very difficult subject, consumer debt, and does an admirable job with it. Note that even though it's a newsy topic, she still uses emotional tape and anecdotes in reporting it:

Listen to Kristen Gillespie's Story – 7:11

<http://streaming.jrn.columbia.edu:8080/ramgen/radio/documentary2005/gillespie.rm?start=00:00:25>

One of the weirdest stories in the final batch was by Michael Rice. It's a profile of a New York city beekeeper, sort of, but it goes a lot of other places as well:

Listen to Michael Rice's Story – 8:38

<http://streaming.jrn.columbia.edu:8080/ramgen/radio/documentary2005/rice.rm?start=00:00:27>

Now that the class is over, I'm especially curious to hear from the students. I'm curious about a couple things specifically, and maybe you guys could post a little about this. First, what if anything did you guys learn from the documentary class. Second, what are you all doing now that you all have graduated? And finally, are you able to apply anything you learned in class to your jobs/lives post Columbia?

Conversation pt. 2

Jonathan Schienberg - *June 20, 2005 - #42*

Although I came into the class with no previous radio experience and whined a lot about Pro Tools, I couldn't have chosen a better way to go out. Our class was full of great human-interest stories and the interviewing techniques and writing techniques you taught helped me a great deal.

Seeking out anecdotes and building scenes are elements that transcend all journalism mediums and the class helped me to significantly develop those skills (especially when I would be 2/3 done with an 8 minute piece and realize I had no real anecdotes or scenes)...

kimberly kinchen - *June 20, 2005 - #43*

First, this class, like most of my classes here, had the effect of making me feel like - damn, I learned so much, and damn, now there's so much more to learn...

I don't remember you, Alex, talking a lot specifically about interviewing during the class. Early on, you did talk about how to think about the questions you wanted to ask, and how to organize those questions, and some of the standards you can always use - "talk more about that" etc. Maybe once you actually said, here's how to conduct an interview.

But now I realize you were talking about it almost all the time, and you did it by talking about what to listen for in the tape, what to try to elicit, and by always always always, in excerpts you brought in and in our listening sessions, pointing out pieces of good tape, of the different kinds of moments that make good tape - basically all the stuff you write about above in Part II. And I think now more in terms of moments, whereas I used to think in terms of words, facts, whatever...

So I think the way I listen is changing, or I'm trying to change the way I listen, and I can't ever imagine this NOT being useful whether I end up in radio or print or wherever. A moment can contain a fact, can convey a fact, but a fact can rarely convey a moment, or the idea that a moment reflects.

The idea that you can actually AUDITION people was revolutionary to me...

Michael Rice - *June 22, 2005 - #48*

...As for what I learned in class (in addition to how to record narration under my down comforter), I think the most important lesson was recognizing what a radio story is not. Manifesto Part 2 is a good summary of the points Alex emphasized in our last weeks of class. Auditioning your subjects to find the ones who can speak in anecdotes and framing your pitch by saying, “My story is about ‘x’ and what’s interesting about it is...” (that is, looking for the unexpected) were all valuable take-home lessons. Almost as valuable as Alex’s credo: “If it’s not from Kentucky, it’s not really bourbon.”

Vivek Kemp - *June 23, 2005 - #53*

Before Alex’s class, an “actuality” was merely a fact...Radio was foreign.

But eventually I learned that I needed the selfsame ingredients to tell a story with sound as I did with written words. I needed stories over subjects and topics, characters over generalities, and anecdotes over statements. Then blend, being sure to add a dash of narration.

I blended alright.

My final story was about what motivated people to become subway performers, a story ripe with sound. After I had collected all the sound I thought, “This is going to be great, I’ll lace the entire 10 minutes with subway-music, and churning MTA cars.”

“It’ll be like producing a hit record!” I was zealous with sound. While editing I ended up overdoing it.

Alex listened graciously. Then calmly exclaimed that my story encountered just about every production problem it could have. Who knew a radio story could have too much sound. But as he told me once: people learn the lessons they need as they need them.

Kristen Gillespie - *June 26, 2005 - #58*

Even though I will probably never end up doing TAL-style stories, what I will take with me back into the work world is what Alex hopefully pounded into my head: the elements of a good story, and how to tell it. Of course this also means I will become an even more prickly media consumer.

Some of the debate above touched on story-telling. My (professional) radio reports are capped at a maximum of 30 seconds; I work for all-news radio and am based in the Middle East. But what I learned in class is that even the shortest pieces can be stories.

It's all about how you tell them. Beginning, middle, end. Find what everyone can relate to - issues of heart, health and pocketbook, as another radio professor liked to put it.

That's not always an option; time constraints and poor pay usually drive freelancers like me to constantly produce. Sometimes a dearth of information can kill creativity - in Iraq, an American soldier is killed almost every day by a roadside bomb "while on routine patrol." That is often the only information available, and along with a body count, there is not much opportunity to make a report more original.

A few notes on radio: as a "print person," delving into the meta and bringing the reporter into the story, at first, felt horribly wrong. But in radio, it can and does work. A most liberating revelation. Of course, when I finally got the consumer debt story together, I realized I had almost no natural sound. When outlining the story, I did not add the element of sound in my plans. BIG MISTAKE.

As I pack up to move back to Jordan, I wonder how many of Alex's lessons made it into the hard drive. Will I remember to find the surprise in a story? Go against expectation? Lay out the story the right way? ALWAYS GET ANECDOTES? Find compelling characters? And one of Alex's most valuable points: don't let your interviewee push his/her talking points on you. Include what you didn't expect them to say, and pursue that route.

Anaheed Alani - *June 21, 2005 - #44*

I love the way John Nielson re-approaches that guy. But the quote he gets, even after all that, still kinda sucks. "Community," "citywide," "region-wide"--none of those are words most people actually use in conversation. NOT TO BE A HARDASS OR ANYTHING.

Also, this?

Stop them and say, "I want you to answer that question again, but this time use the word sad instead of lachrymose."

I would feel really uncomfortable saying something like that as an interviewer, because I would feel really uncomfortable as the interviewee. Suddenly it's like you don't just want me to talk and say what's on my mind. You want me to say it YOUR way...

Alex Blumberg - June 21, 2005 - #45

“sad instead of lachrymose.”

Well, that line was sort of facetious. But yes, if someone was using a word I was afraid no one would understand, I'd ask them to say it again. But you're right, you definitely don't want to make people more uncomfortable than they already are. And I'm certainly not advocating interrupting people all the time about their diction. It really depends on what kind of story you're doing. If it's more intimate emotional tape you're going for, maybe you don't interrupt them at all, but just circle back and ask the question again. Maybe you model the kind of language you want them to use in your follow-up question: "That must have really sucked for you, huh." Maybe they're the kind of person who says lachrymose and you want to include that in the story. Maybe you hold yourself up as the dumbshit: "lachrymose? what does that mean again?" and just let that exchange play out in the tape. My point is just that you can be more assertive than you think you can. Being clear about what you want from people and working with them to try and get it is always fine.

Mark Brush - June 24, 2005 - #55

I think taking the dumbshit approach is a good one

My first thought re: your post about asking someone to say 'sad' instead of 'lachrymose' was "isn't that a little unethical?" I'd prefer all the other solutions you mention over asking someone to say something on tape.

And I felt the way Nielsen tried to get that guy to rephrase what he said was a little over the top. Maybe I'm just too wimpy, and I don't know the extent to which he went to get the scientist to speak normally (he sounded pretty frustrated), but wouldn't a "what do you mean by that?" or a "what would you say to someone who says that going to zoo could kill you?" or "what? I don't understand what you're saying" or several of those questions over and over again be a better approach? I fear that you might push someone too hard with the other approach - esp. if your trying to get them to talk naturally - seems like the pushy approach might make them more nervous - or worse - offended enough to stop talking to you.

If you act like a dumbshit (or better yet, if you are a dumbshit like me!! , then their internal dialogue might be, "Holy crap! This guy's an imbecile... I'll have to break it down in simple terms for him."

Alex Blumberg - Jun 26, 2005 - #60

Mark Brush, you raise an interesting point...I agree completely. You never ever want to alienate your interview subject. But letting them stray far from the question, or letting them go off on boring tangents, or letting them go on and on when they've clearly misunderstood your question is not the same as not alienating someone. My point is a small one: you can be a little more assertive than you probably think you can. Not everyone has to go all John Nielsen on people. Be charming about it, for God's sake. Just know that you're in control of the conversation.

Now, the dumbshit method is time-honored and one of my personal favorites. In fact, i use it pretty much all the time. Or more precisely, I AM it, and I don't go out of my way to disguise it during interviews. But even if you're using the dumbshit method, you're directing the interview. You'll get someone to tell something again, by saying, "i didn't get that thing you were saying back there ..." or you'll even cut people off if they start to stray: "wait, wait, wait, I lost you there, you were talking about ..."

As for sad vs. lachrymose. It's just, if people use jargon the rest of us don't understand, it weakens the meaning. It's the difference between "this product will cause a negative and likely terminal health outcome" and "this product could easily kill you." I don't think it's unethical to make people talk clearly. As long as you're not changing the meaning.

laura b - *June 23, 2005* - #54

It's Laura, the TAL intern. So I opened a submissions envelope the other day and found this guy's life story. Which, in most cases, is not a promising thing to find. But this guy's life has been fairly amazing: his parents were Communists in 1940's LA, and ended up sending him to an orphanage from the time he was 3 until he was 6. He ran away at 13 and hitch hiked to New York, and then eventually made it to Tonga, where he started making recordings of everything around him before he was kicked off the island for dating a princess. He sent a tape of some of the oldest recordings and some basic facts checked out google-wise, so I called him. And he is not an anecdote kind of guy. Questions like what it was like to see his parents when he came home from the orphanage didn't really go anywhere. The story about dating the princess went something like "So I was dating the princess and then I realized that I had to get off the island or I'd get in trouble." I kept pushing for details and stories, but without much success.

So the possibilities are A. He made the whole thing up and is actually a man who just saw a Discovery Channel show on Tonga
 B. He is not an anecdote kind of guy, and I'm not quite sure how to get non-anecdote people to tell good stories

Do you have any more advice for getting good tape from non-anecdoters? Or is there a certain point when a person's non-anecdote telling trumps the interestingness of the story that they have to tell?

Alex Blumberg - June 26, 2005 - #59

Wow, you're confronted with one of the most extreme cases of a good story happening to a bad storyteller that I've heard. And I would agree with your possible diagnoses.

I believe that sometimes, no matter how depressing it is to realize this, if someone's a very bad storyteller, it can trump a great story. It sounds like the Tonga guy is one of these people. There's nothing much you can do. He needs to feel SOMETHING about it, you know? Or have one anecdote. Or some thought about what he went through. You can help people, definitely, but only to a certain extent. They have to give you something. That being said, there are questions you might ask him, to flesh things out.

- 1) ask about details: what's the most vivid memory he has from dating the princess? does he remember the moment he realized dating her might get him in trouble? what's the first thing he found strange about Tonga?
- 2) ask about the bigger idea: why does he want to tell this story? What did he learn from living through it? How does he feel different from other people, who haven't lived his crazy background.

one more thought occurs to me: there's sometimes psychological reasons people tell stories badly. one element of good storying is being emotionally connected to the words you're saying, but if people are in denial about something, or suppressing the emotions involved, the story can sound somehow flat and affectless. So it's possible that the whole "my parents sent me to an orphanage when i was three" part of the story has interfered with his ability to actually connect with what he's saying. And in fact he might be telling the story as a jaunty adventure tale as a way of denying his true feelings about what he went through. In other words, the real story is one that he doesn't actually want to tell, or hasn't even admitted to himself, and so the tonga story sounds dull because it's a fake story, designed to normalize an extremely messed up and painful personal history. or, as you say, he could have made the whole thing up.

William Wolfe - July 14, 2005 - #63

About the interviewing tips, I kind of liked the part of the nielson tape where he sort of takes on the persona of a loud belligerent drunk (who happens to have really strong opinions about the local zoo). It was a little awkward even pushy, but it clarified the question, in giving him a starting point for argumentation it helped the scientist guy make the point he was trying to make anyway, and even made him sound a bit more engaged I thought, like he was actually at a bar talking to some jerk.

I've listened to a lot of the TAL episodes over the past six months or so (by the way your testosterone show was great, entertaining and really interesting) and I've got a question: In some of the pieces, by some of the contributors, I'm thinking of Scott Carrier in particular but I'm sure there are other examples, the style of the interviews seem (to me) to contradict some of the things you've been saying here. For example there is one in which Scott stops to talk to some old guy sitting by the side of the road whittling (sp?) and selling sticks. There aren't really any interesting anecdotes, like the plot, plot, reflection, plot, plot, reflection form, the whole conversation never really leaves the realm of whittling and why this guys likes it so much. In sticking to the finer aspects of whittling Scott seems to be leaving the control of the conversation mostly up to the old guy. It seems like a perfect example of something that just isn't going to be interesting, like your community gardens idea, 'so... how about these flowers?', 'you really like gardening huh, that's fascinating', 'those are nice sticks, what kind of wood are they?' 'what's so great about whittling anyway?' A lot of the interviews in the piece are this way, and yet in the end it's engaging and enjoyable to listen to. Another example of this same thing is in the old fall clearance show from like 1997 or something, where Scott (or Mr. Carrier or whatever) tells the little Haiku stories, about rock climbing and mighty mite football and so on. It's kind of like he's interviewing himself, or at least that's how I'm thinking about it, and though the stories generally have that anecdotal quality about them, there are no real climaxes to speak of, or at least not the kind that leads to readily apparent conclusions that should be drawn from the anecdotal events.

So I guess saying that the stuff you've been saying has made a lot of sense to me and so I'm thinking that there must be a relationship between the ideas you're relating and the kind of stories that I've mentioned, but that I just can't quite formulate it. Any ideas?

Alex Blumberg - July 26, 2005 - #69

...When you're Scott Carrier, the normal rules don't really apply. That's why people like him, and David Sedaris and Sarah Vowell, are both the boon and bane of my existence as a radio teacher. On the one hand, they inspire people to want to do radio stories. On the other, they're almost impossible to imitate.

I try to be aware of that as a teacher, though. I call the things I teach "rules" and I believe in them whole-heartedly, but in the end, it's really just a theory of journalism. If someone comes up with another theory, and that theory produces good radio, all the better.

Alex Blumberg Links

Student Work Alex's Class at Columbia School of Journalism:
www.jrn.columbia.edu/studentwork/radio/

***This American Life* Website:**
www.thislife.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.

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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.

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