



The Transom Review

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(Edited by Sydney Lewis)

Elizabeth Arnold



Elizabeth Arnold

Intro from Jay Allison

We think of Elizabeth Arnold as intrepid. After all, her reporting has ranged from the halls of Congress to the world's deepest wilderness. When we created our recent series, *Stories from the Heart of the Land*, we asked Elizabeth to go to the Great Bear Rainforest, Mongolia, and the North Pole! Like I said, intrepid.

But Elizabeth has a different view. She actually feels insecure about her work. Which may be what makes it so good. Come read her manifesto "On Interviewing" which centers on the values of patience and respect. Also, Elizabeth will be available at Transom for a while to answer your questions.

About Elizabeth Arnold

Elizabeth Arnold has worked in public radio for twenty years, fifteen as a national correspondent for NPR.

Arnold's reporting experience with NPR began in rural Alaska, moved to the halls of Congress and the presidential campaign trail, and then back west, and home to Alaska. That path imbues Arnold's reports with both the seasoned experience of national politics and a personal understanding of the rapidly changing American landscape.

Arnold is perhaps best known for nearly a decade of political reporting on Capitol Hill. As a congressional reporter and then as NPR's national political correspondent, Arnold covered the House and Senate, congressional campaigns, and four presidential elections. From incumbent President George Bush's battle to win a second term to the Clinton White House, the Republican takeover of Congress, Bob Dole's ill-fated campaign, and George W. Bush's controversial election, Arnold tirelessly reported local, state, and national politics from the heartland, the campaign plane, and the convention halls. Along the way she won numerous awards, most notably the Joan Shorenstein Barone Award for Outstanding Journalism, the Dirksen Award for Distinguished Reporting on Congress, and the Alfred I. DuPont-Columbia University Silver Baton for Excellence in Journalism. She's also received top honors from the Society of

Professional Journalists, American Women in Radio and Television, and the Washington Press Club Foundation. Arnold began her career in journalism between seasons as a commercial salmon fisherman, as a reporter for the San Juan Examiner and the Telluride Times in Colorado and for the Tundra Drums, in Bethel, Alaska. Arnold graduated cum laude from Colgate University in New York with bachelor's degrees in English and fine arts. She remains an avid hiker, skier, and long-distance runner. (She did, however, sell her Harley Davidson to pay for her son's pre-school tuition.)

On Interviewing

So much has already been covered on this site that I found myself at a loss for what I could contribute. Here are all these fabulous radio types offering cogent nuggets of wisdom with just the right balance of humor and insight. What could I possibly have to offer?

So like any challenging writing project, when I'm casting about and can't come up with anything good, I fall back on the truth. Yes, honesty. It always seems to work for me.

Here's my big secret. I'm shy and insecure. Really.

If there's one assignment I hate more than anything in the world it's "man on the street," "vox," or as one AP radio reporter friend calls it "triple A...Ask Any Asshole." I hate it simply because I am shy and insecure. Really.

The idea of walking up to a perfect stranger and asking a question like, "How did you feel on September 11th?" Or "what do you think about the fact that farmed salmon has red dye added to it?" I can't do it. It's intrusive, it's arrogant, it's obnoxious...and worst of all it gives the person a perfectly legitimate opportunity to tell me what a jerk I am to my face, or better yet, the once in a lifetime opportunity to snub a reporter with "no comment."

But I do it.

So, how could someone like me possibly be a poking, prodding, intrusive, obnoxious, question-asking reporter for more than 20 years, asking any asshole anything on a daily basis?

In a way I think, my insecurity and shyness has helped. I am forced to dig down deep, to summon the courage to blurt out my question. It had better be good, it had better be important, I better not be wasting this person's time.....okay just hear me out, before you start blogging all over the place about how lame I am.

One of my first reporting jobs was in a remote Yupik village in northwestern Alaska. Well, I was first and foremost the typesetter, then the honey bucket dumper, and THEN the reporter.

Anyway, it was a tough beat for any number of reasons, not the least of which was that I was a white girl in a tightly knit native village.

But here's the thing that made it most difficult.

In the Yupik language and culture, there are no questions. One does not ask a question.

It's rude. Very rude. As in, you will never get an answer out of anyone rude. So, you hang out, and maybe just maybe, in the course of hanging out and talking and listening, some answers to whatever you are wondering might be forthcoming.

It's like asking your kid how school was? "Fine." You get nothing. End of conversation.

But, instead if you start telling your kid how lousy or great YOUR day was, you won't even get a chance to finish before he'll want to jump in with some complaint or triumph of his own.



Elizabeth Arnold in China

So, I cut my teeth as a reporter in a community where questions were prohibited. I learned patience. I learned how to listen and how to ask questions with my eyes. I learned the importance of letting the tape roll through the silences. More importantly, I left that village thinking that every interview is a gift, that when someone speaks into my microphone, they are giving me something that I should treat with respect, even if it's just an opinion about farmed salmon. Oh I know you are groaning and rolling your eyes but I'm talking ordinary people here.

PUBLIC FIGURES ARE A WHOLE DIFFERENT BALL GAME.

And maybe that's why it was so EASY for me to be a tough political reporter...those people deserved every stupid question I ever asked. You run for office, you make yourself a public figure, you ask for it.

BUT, back to the normal folks who don't think they should be President, who don't even know why you want to know what they think. Why should they talk to you...I mean really, why?



Elizabeth Arnold in Mongolia

I have spent a lot of years reporting on indigenous people. What I learned is pretty simple. It's all about time and respect.

Years ago, I went to a tiny community in the Arctic where I was hoping to speak with an elder who supposedly was the leader of the opposition to mineral development there. She was an old woman who lived in a one room cabin. I had nowhere to sleep, no one to show me around, in short, no clue whatsoever, once I was dropped by small plane into this village.

I walked down a dirt road and started asking for her. I was petrified I wouldn't find her or even if I did, I'd get nothing.

When I got to her cabin she just grunted when I tried to explain ever so respectfully why I had come to her village and why I wanted to talk to her.

Long story short, three days later, after I had plucked her ducks (the tedious part of cleaning waterfowl before cooking it), split her wood, and helped butcher her brother's caribou, she told me she was ready. Ready to talk. And it was good.

Here's a bit of what made it into the piece. Bear in mind this was twenty years ago, so cut me some slack. Sarah had never done an interview before. Now she regularly lobbies Congress on behalf of the Gwichin.

Listen to an audio clip from Elizabeth Arnold:

http://www.transom.org/guests/review/200804_elizabeth_arnold/assets/ea_audio_clip_.mp3

Sure there are people who can't wait to tell their stories, who want to take the mic in their own hands they're so eager. But most folks aren't that way. They need time to understand what you aim to do with their words, time to trust you, and they need your patience while they say what it is they want to say, just to get it out, before you start in with the pointed questions.



Elizabeth Arnold in China

I've met so many good people over the years through reporting. And bad ones too. But I can honestly say I don't think I've ever treated anything anyone's ever said to me on tape without respect, even points of view and positions so extreme and offensive to me that I could barely stay focused.

So what am I offering here with this? Maybe just the idea that everyone isn't of the MySpace generation, that what people tell us on tape is of value and we should take care with it. Maybe that's obvious? I don't know. It certainly wasn't for me and I think it's only my shyness and insecurity that makes me apologize in advance when I interrupt some already overburdened mother at the Safeway to ask her what she thought of Hillary's tears.

Ok so the truth is out of the way. Now maybe I could answer some more practical questions about interviewing? About working in remote areas? About overbearing editors? Ask away.

Related Links

Listen to Elizabeth's pieces from Atlantic Public Media's recent series:

Stories from the Heart of the Land as part of the **Nature Stories**

Podcast: <http://podcast.prx.org/nature/>

Great Bear Rainforest:

<http://podcast.prx.org/nature/wp-content/uploads/2007/08/nsp078.mp3>

90 Degrees North:

<http://podcast.prx.org/nature/wp-content/uploads/2007/09/nsp084.mp3>

Elbow Room:

<http://podcast.prx.org/nature/wp-content/uploads/2008/03/nsp108.mp3>

Read an interview with Elizabeth Arnold.:

http://www.atlantic.org/projects/heartoftheland/imagination_arnold.php

Comments

Richard Ziglar - May 6, 2008 - #1

Hi Elizabeth,

I have just recently started trying to create audio docs and was working on a piece for Passover that ended up being the story on one man's internment in the Riga Ghetto during WWII. I did not know the subject before I interviewed him and I felt privileged that he would share the details of his experience with me.

He came to the part of his story where he recounted the last time he saw his family alive and started choking up. At that moment I apologized for having the tape recorder on and turned it off. This was not a really thought out action. It was just pure reflex on my part. As it is, he really did not want to discuss that part of his story after I turned the recorder off but I wonder in retrospect if his not wanting to discuss it after that was a reaction to what I did.



I used that tape in the story I produced. Is there any time it is appropriate to turn your recorder off out of respect for the other person? I know most people are going to say no but there does seem to be a space for respecting other people's privacy too.

Elizabeth Arnold - May 9, 2008 - #5

You're right, I think the stock answer is of course NO! never turn it off, but again, as you say, you felt privileged that he was sharing the details of his experience with you. With that, I think is a certain responsibility to handle his words with care. I think in that circumstance I would have kept the tape running. If he then asked you specifically to turn it off, by all means turn it off. It's his grief.

But your turning it off might have been premature. When people break down and I start feeling like a real jerk for still rolling, I'll ask, is it okay that I'm still recording? and I'm always quite amazed that they usually don't mind. Then you get to the hard part, which is what do you use and not use in the story.

I once used at least a full ten seconds of silence on ATC when Bob Dole broke down on the campaign trail. My standard there is, you use it if it advances the story, if it's telling, not just because it's someone breaking down. In that case, it was real telling about Dole's emotional state after six months of flat out campaigning.

sarahp - May 7, 2008 - #2

When you go on these assignments and are interviewing people, do you usually have a story and a plan in mind or do you go in hoping that the story will create itself as you spend time there?

What are the kinds of things you say to people when they don't see the worth of their story being shared? I have found myself in this situation before and feel like I may have turned the recorder on too quickly. When do you turn the recorder on after chopping wood and fishing and working with someone for a while - do you keep asking or do you wait until they come back to you and say they are ready?

And how do you cope with missing all that sound while you're working before the recorder is on? Once they are willing to be recorded do you ask them to go back and do those things with you again?

What are some of those good important questions on your list that you generally ask to strike a cord with someone you are interviewing? Have you worked with interpreters? How does this change the dynamic of your conversation and the trust someone might or might not have in you?

(lots of questions! thanks for sharing your thoughts about the great work you do.)

Elizabeth Arnold - May 9, 2008 - #7

Wow, lots of questions.

Of course, when I head out, I've got a story in mind, but what I DON'T have is some sort of outline of it's shape, and OFTEN a completely different story unfolds or, what I assumed turns out to be totally wrong. So, in short, I try to be as open minded as possible and not commit too much to a specific story when I lay it out to the editor beforehand. This is often tricky because, they want to know exactly what you are going to get! But, if what you get is truly better and more accurate, most editors will honor that and go with it, especially if you've got great tape!

As for talking about the story with those who are in it, I try to avoid that as much as possible. I tell them what I'm interested in, but again try to leave it as open ended as I can. I don't know how many times I've been asked "what's your angle?" and it's tough to convince people that you really don't have one.

I basically make sure that they understand that I'm interested in what they're up to and if I am, someone else is too.

With more reticent subjects, I don't keep asking when I can turn the mic on, I just play it by ear and when it feels right, I'll say something like, "well let's do this on tape so I don't have to make you say these things over again.." and YES I hate missing good sound, but if that's what it takes to build trust, there's usually some other sound worth waiting for.. and NO I

don't ask that we do things over in terms of action, unless it's in the natural course of events.

When I'm having trouble getting at the real person inside, even if it's some guy from the Department of Environmental Conservation who's telling me about legislation to remedy leaky underground storage tanks, I'll try to pull them out of the moment with something like "Why do you do this?" "Why do you even care?" I might not use the tape, but often it changes the tone and dynamic of what's to follow.

I have worked with interpreters and I hate it. But I try to use humor as much as possible in those situations and it usually helps!

cstifter - May 7, 2008 - #3

Thanks for putting yourself into situations that required you to cultivate core values of patience and honesty as an interviewer. And also thanks for having the guts to write about it for your colleagues and fans.

I have spent some time training reporters about interviewing. Often, when I have suggested a similar approach (not the butchering or wood chopping, but the patience, respect, and observation parts) young reporters especially, don't really get it. I'm not sure patience is something you can teach. But it is damn sure something a person can learn.

But that requires being open to other approaches to the relationship between interviewer and interviewee, doesn't it? It requires the belief that the interviewer might not know everything there is to know about the interviewee (even if one has done one's homework).

I really appreciate your words about crossing the divides (cultural, geographic, etc.) in order to hear the story. Your manifesto is a primer for producers who wish to engage with people on the other side of the divide, whatever it is.

I had a kind of similar experience this summer, doing a story about Mono Lake in the eastern Sierra. We were scheduled to meet a Paiute/Miwok woman who was going to show us how to gather traditional basket materials that are threatened by declining lake levels. We met at the local coffeeshop and had breakfast. We talked for an hour. Then she drove us to

an area where she said it was now hard to even find those materials. We followed her through desert brushlands for 3 hours not finding even a path to get down to the lake where the materials were supposed to be.

At some point into a very hot afternoon in July after our water ran out, I realized it was a kind of test. Now, I don't take this kind of thing personally, but it often happens to me, a white woman, when I'm working on Indigenous stories with Indian interviewees. Go figure.

Three hours later, we made it back to the car, picked up and dropped off her kid from work at the Dairy Queen, drove to the other side of the lake, just in time for sunset and Lucy Parker allowed us to record her prayer for Mono Lake. This recording begins the whole story in our documentary.

My editor asked me, in all seriousness; "Do you really need to start the story with an Indian prayer?" "Yes", I said, "We do need to start there." Because we were there together with Lucy, in some special experience, and that's what is always so powerful to share with listeners.

I'm interested to hear more of your stories about being a white gal doing stories with Indigenous folks from Alaska to Mongolia. How did you become so genuinely curious about others?

Elizabeth Arnold - May 9, 2008 - #6

I laughed when I read your editor's question and good for you for hanging in there with it. I know that often native american music or language can produce automatic eye rolls from editors, sort of like the clanging of prison doors...cliche, cliche... but I fight it and the best way to fight it is to find new ways of getting native voices on the air. Here in Alaska it's so great because even the PSA's are often in two languages and it reminds you of where you live and who was here first!

We've heard nothing but political speeches, pundits, rallies and election returns for months now and there isn't a single editor out there calling that "click."

As for curiosity, I just can't seem to stop myself from wondering who people are, where and how they live, what they think about, what their stories are...but I think it's more empathic than scientific.

When I was in Sri Lanka after the tsunami, I was so struck by how people were just going on with their lives despite all the devastation and I couldn't stop interviewing even though the story was supposed to be about an environmental assessment! I ended up writing a reporter's notebook that was much more satisfying than the two radio pieces I produced.

Connor Walsh - May 7, 2008 - #4

Thanks for the honesty! I really hate doing vox-pops, and as an independent, when it sometimes seems like the only way to get content in a new town, it can be as easy to not ask the questions, and simply go hungry.

I learned to respect interviewees when I first arrived at Radio New Zealand and was sent – as an exercise – to record at a Maori festival. I knew no background at all, and didn't know how much most listeners would.

So starting off easy, I went to the old ladies selling home-made foods. And got a bollocking for waving my mics about at them. I was very, very chastened, and only spoke to people previously recommended to me after that. The angriest of the ladies subsequently came over, told me of her own experience as a reporter and encouraged me – twice! She even helped set up an interview. I never got over the ego-bruising to listen back to the tape. I think she saw how I was, I guess, naive rather than malicious.

I made a couple of pieces for that station, and never went back to sign the contract for the one that would have been paid, because of – you mentioned it –an overbearing editor!

So how DO you deal with them?

Much obliged!

Elizabeth Arnold - May 9, 2008 - #8

...I must choose my words carefully here.

The best editor is the one who you trust so much you'll try jumping off cliffs knowing he or she won't let you fall. Bad analogy I know, but what I mean is, you take risks in your writing and story telling as opposed to playing it safe because you know if it doesn't work and you're just making a fool of yourself, your editor won't let it happen.

What I mean by overbearing editors, are those who really just want to write the thing themselves, which would be a lovely job wouldn't it? Someone else goes out gets all the tape does all the research, outlines it all for you and then you just "make it your own." ??

When I sense, and mind you this is very rare, that an editor doesn't have a clue and is just suggesting random word changes here and there or asking for tape that doesn't exist and couldn't possibly exist ("do you have any tape of the murderer actually discussing his intent beforehand?" "do you have the sound of the bear actually crunching down on your hand?"). I just get real quiet. I don't argue, I don't discuss, I just listen. I hear them out, and usually in the course of this, they slow down on the dinking around and the wishing for miracle tape and face the reality of the story...and eventually..the deadline.

But my biggest rule of thumb with editors is by any and all means possible, avoid ever having MORE than one editor for the same piece. It's a recipe for disaster.

Melissa Robbins - May 12, 2008 - #9

Thanks so much for posting, and for your honesty. In a recent article for AIR, Sean Cole said some related things about the terror of approaching strangers.

"My dirty secret is that I have every wrong instinct for my chosen profession," he said, echoing my own secret fear of being a fraud among journalists.

He also said: "I have a pathological desire to be on everybody's good side." Which I sometimes feel as well.

And I'm wondering if, after chopping wood, pulling feathers and waiting for trust from an interviewee...do you ever have a hard time telling the story "objectively" (whatever the hell that means)? Do you have ever have a hard time keeping an independent compass on the narrative?

I mean, I often end up *liking* people-- which is not necessarily a disaster with certain types of stories. But I worry about it.

Do you ever feel like you're walking a fine line? What do you tell yourself in those moments?

Thanks for your thoughtful thoughts.

Jay Allison - May 13, 2008 - #10

Yes, Sean Cole's piece for AIR is a good companion to what Elizabeth has written here. You can find it here:

<http://www.airmedia.org/PageInfo.php?PageID=382>

Elizabeth Arnold - May 16, 2008 - #11

Liking People? That's just it!! ...and there's something about someone opening up to you and telling you their story that makes you like them even more!

I don't think empathy is a bad emotion in reporting. As for objectivity...in choosing to do a particular story you are already making a subjective decision. My guideline is fairness.

Is the story fair? Have I treated this person fairly? Have I treated someone else who may see things differently fairly? Have I treated the subject fairly?

I'm working on a story right now on coastal erosion, and the villain I guess, is anyone who has ever contributed to greenhouse gases... there is no "other side" to the story...the simple truth is that indigenous people are among the first to feel the effects of climate change.

While I probably won't find someone to argue that this is all well and good and that this is somehow their fault...I will be trying to find a fair way to discuss some of the less black and white aspects of the issue.

I don't think being dispassionate necessarily translates into fairness or even objectivity. Often it translates into a boring story where you can actually feel the distance between the reporter and the subject and even more troubling to me, the reporter or host can often sound downright condescending. I hate that!

Sydney Lewis - Jun 2, 2008 - #12

You've been reporting short-form for a long time. Are there any stories you can't quite let go of? Just wondering if you've any thoughts of venturing into longer-form territory -- documentary or book.

Thanks again for your honest sharing.

Elizabeth Arnold - Jun 3, 2008 - #13

Sure I think about it Syd! Every time I have to cut a story down! Sorry I was late in responding but I've been out in the Bush working on a "short" story about coastal erosion (and got weathered in 100 miles north of the arctic circle). I will get to do a 29 minute version for a new show called Encounters and I'm really looking forward to it.

I'd love to try a documentary and am actually even more interested in writing a book. During my political years I got all the offers most political reporters get, to write that kind of book, but I was never real thrilled about doing a tell all from the campaign trail.

I WOULD like to stretch up here though, to write something about my life in the North and the people I've met and the experiences I've had, from the canneries to fishing Bristol Bay, to time in the Bush and way north to the North Pole, there's a lot to write about! not sure how to do it yet and not sure there's much interest in it!

Elizabeth Arnold - Jun 5, 2008 - #14**addendum**

Over the last few weeks I've flown to several coastal Arctic villages here in Alaska, both Yupik and Inupiaq. I'm working on a few stories about erosion and the human dimension of climate change. Although I thought I was prepared for it, having lived in the region, I was startled yet again by the isolation of these places and at the same time, the strength of the communities.

Most Americans don't even know there are villages that exist in America with no sewage and no running water, where people speak a language other than English because they were here first.

I was reminded yet again of the need for patience and respect, as no one wanted to talk to me and I wandered around aimlessly pointing my mic at sand and ice. But as the weather changed, as it always does, and all hope of leaving disappeared, I settled in for the long haul, sleeping at the school or in elders one room houses, hunting for bird eggs and mouse caches with kids who marveled at my freckles, and mostly, just waiting.

Slowly, I got the tape I needed. But over that time, I was reminded again of what is most important about these places, how closely the people live to the land and how it defines them, a critical part of the story.

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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