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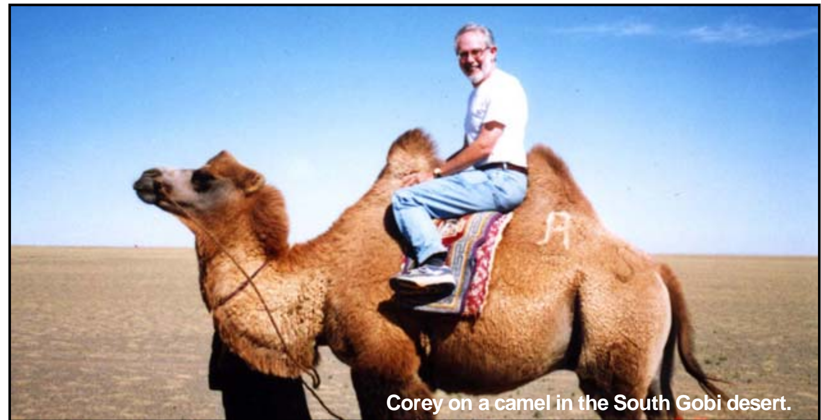
Corey Flintoff's Topic

About Corey Flintoff


Corey on a camel in the South Gobi desert.

Corey Flintoff is an evening newscaster for National Public Radio (NPR). He writes and delivers six hourly newscasts each night as part of NPR's newsmagazine *All Things Considered*.

Flintoff has been a newscaster and reporter with NPR's Washington, National, and Foreign Desks since 1990. Prior to joining NPR, Flintoff was executive producer for Alaska Public Radio Network (APRN), supervising the production of all news programming and hosting an evening newsmagazine. While at APRN, Flintoff filed freelance reports for NPR, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Monitor Radio, and the Associated Press. He won a 1989 Corporation for Public Broadcasting Silver Award for his coverage of the Exxon Valdez oil spill.

Prior to APRN, Flintoff worked as a reporter, editor, and producer for KYUK-TV/Bethel, Alaska, and KSKA-FM/Anchorage. While at KYUK, he wrote and produced a number of television documentaries, including “Eyes of the Spirit” and “They Never Asked Our Fathers.”

Flintoff's first radio experience was at a bilingual English-Yup'ik Eskimo station in Bethel, Alaska, where he learned enough Yup'ik to announce the station identification information. He has also been a novelist, dog-musher, and commercial herring fisherman.

Flintoff earned a bachelor's degree from the University of California at Berkeley, and a master's degree from the University of Chicago, both in English literature. Born in Fairbanks, Alaska, he now lives in Washington, DC, with his wife, Diana Derby, and their daughter, Claire.

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Introduction by Jay Allison

We all know Corey's voice. And, somehow, his name goes so well with it. Warmth and strength. Combined with his deceptively simple news writing, the whole package gives us something solid to lean up against every evening. I believe some measure of the trust placed in NPR derives from its Corey Flintoff-ness.

It's no wonder that Corey was drawn to Mongolia. I once slept on his living room floor with his sled dogs in Bethel, Alaska. As I recall, there was one tree in the whole town. It was in Corey's front yard by the dog house. He called it the Bethel National Forest. Like Mongolia, it was vast, frozen, dark, and barren up there... good radio country.

I've been anxious to hear what Corey's trip was like. Below, he tells us. He'll be around to answer your questions about radio in Mongolia, or about reliably newscasting for all these years.

Corey Flintoff's Manifesto

May 10, 2002

Getting the Hell Out;

Toward New Radio in Mongolia

We Found Ourselves in Ulaanbaatar

Corey with a Kazahk eagle hunter in far western Mongolia

Sometimes you just have to get the hell out.

That's pretty much the gist of what Ishmael has to say in the first chapter of *Moby Dick*, and it's good advice, even today. I got the hell out of NPR for six months last year on a Knight International Press Fellowship to teach journalism and radio production in Mongolia, and while I didn't come up with enough material for a 600-page novel, it gave me a lot to think about.

Why get out? Sometimes even the best job starts to feel stale. I like newscasting on *All Things Considered*, but it's a long way from my roots as a radio reporter in rural Alaska. I got into radio first, and journalism second. I got into radio because I love stories, and news is just a subcategory of stories. I was influenced by six years of listening to Studs Terkel on WFMT in Chicago, but I didn't

find out about NPR until I'd actually started volunteering at KYUK in Bethel, Alaska. NPR was still a new-kid phenom in 1977, but lots of us quickly tried to apply its style at our local stations. I did commercial salmon-fishing stories in the business style of Robert Krulwich, stories on the *aurora borealis* in the scientific manner of Ira Flatow, and city-council politics a la Linda Wertheimer. I even did radio drama in multi-leveled imitation of Tom Lopez. I tried to cram sound into everything I did, sometimes drowning what I had to say in an ocean of ambience. It was fun. After working in Washington for 12 years, I missed it.

Why Mongolia? When I was 11, my mother gave me a copy of Harold Lamb's *Genghis Khan* for Christmas. It was wonderful, as remote from anything I knew as Oz or Outer Space. I never forgot it. It came back to me a couple of years ago when I was writing some articles about NPR for the Encyclopedia of Radio. Sooner or later, everything I researched led back to Bill Siemering, the man who'd envisioned that NPR style that I'd been so enamored with when I first got started in radio. Bill now works for the Soros Foundation, planting public radio stations and public radio ideals in places as diverse as South Africa, Bulgaria and Ukraine. When I finally met Bill, he had a stack of photos from his most recent travels -- in Mongolia. One of the photos showed a leathery guy in a steeple-topped cap, perched on a camel in a wintry desert. It showed me that the Mongolia of Genghis was still there. I had to go.

Bill told me about the Knight International Press Fellowships. The program bills itself as a journalistic Peace Corps, helping the growth of free media in developing democracies. It sends reporters to host countries for anywhere from 2 to 9 months and helps connect them with training programs. One of the program's limitations is underlined by the fact that it's called the *Press* fellowship, meaning its main experience has been with print journalists. That's good, as far as it goes, but in countries with far-flung populations and low rates of literacy, radio can often go a lot farther. The International Center for Journalists, which administers the Knight Fellowships, is trying to add more broadcasters to its rolls.

My wife, Diana Derby, is a former production engineer for the Alaska Public Radio Network and Pacifica. Somehow, Mongolia didn't seem implausible to her, or to my daughter Claire (but then Claire was 9 at the time). We applied, and in June of last year, we found ourselves in Ulaanbaatar.

Pretty Tape & Cheap Receivers

The capital of Mongolia is spread out on a plain surrounded by green hills, where Genghis (he's called Chingis in Mongolian) and his successors held yearly encampments. Half its 700,000 people live in Soviet-style apartment blocks, while the rest are camped around the city in felt yurts, called gers. It got the name Ulaanbaatar, meaning "Red Hero," following the 1921 revolution that made Mongolia the world's second Communist country, after Russia. Since the collapse of the Communist regime in 1991, the Socialist edifice has been crumbling, while Capitalism takes root in the cracks. Horsemen in long robes and boots herd their cattle in the streets, while young women pick their way through the rubble in miniskirts and the kind of stiletto heels that used to be imagined only in cheap detective novels.

The state of radio in Mongolia reflects all this. I did most of my teaching in dusty provincial towns where the Soros Foundation, USAID, and UNESCO are funding small FM stations, most of them with no more than a 100-watt transmitter. A typical station has about five staffers, including the station manager. Combination deejay/reporters work seven days a week for the equivalent of $25 to $35 a month. This is not good money even by Mongolian standards. The shortest joke in Mongolian is "I live on my salary." Everybody moonlights, which exposes journalists to all kinds of temptations and conflicts of interest.

Bill Siemering has been working to get decent equipment into the stations, but many of them are still encumbered with ancient gear from Eastern Europe. The standard is a clunky Hungarian cassette deck, heavy as a Nagra, with the fidelity of a telephone answering machine. All this is left over from the Socialist system, when national radio was hard-wired into everyone's apartment. You still see these cheap receivers hanging on hotel-room walls, the perfect symbols of totalitarian government. Since there's no choice of stations, there's no tuning knob, only a volume control. (I suppose if it were a perfect symbol, there'd be no volume knob either).

Because state-run radio had never really bothered with sound quality, no one at the independent stations was aware of it either. I spent a lot of time badgering my students into wearing headphones when they were recording and showing them how to set levels. I was reminded how much of our craft is really learned through apprenticeship. You learn by doing and by making mistakes. You learn faster when there's someone to show you what to do.

I was also reminded that you have to listen to a lot of good stuff before you can set standards for yourself. I'd brought a lot of pretty tape with me, thinking that the great production would be apparent, even to people who spoke no English. That didn't work, of course, because great radio is all about the sound illuminating the meaning. I had to start projects at each station that would produce Mongolian-language examples of what I wanted to demonstrate.

I also had the good luck to come by a "bad example" tape early in my travels. Old Time Socialist radio isn't quite dead in Mongolia yet, especially in the still-Red provinces in the south and west. We visited one station in a town that was controlled by a local Communist boss. There were four reporters at the station, guys in their mid-fifties, who'd spent most of their careers under Communism and had no interest in doing things any other way. They read government news releases in authoritative voices, larded their copy with statistics and punctuated their stories with staticky actualities. Most of the day they sat in the studio, smoking and cracking jokes. They were masters at doing what people in totalitarian states do best, evading the Authorities. They gave me copies of their news programs, which I was able to use ever afterward as examples of what not to do. I did take care to cover up their identities. After all, they were guys my age. In another life, they could just as easily have been me.

Radio From The Rock

This craft of ours is a practical thing. If you're like me, you don't really learn anything unless you have to put it into practice the very next day. I tried to leave each station with a project or two that would force everyone to use the ideas and techniques we'd gone over in the workshops. At Dalanzadgad, in the south Gobi desert, we did a preview of the town's upcoming Naadam festival. Naadam celebrates what Mongols call "the three manly sports," archery, horseracing and wrestling. (Actually, women are pretty formidable competitors in the first categories, and the men are said to be afraid to let them into wrestling.) The program called for us to go out and record the twang of archers' bows, the grunts of wrestlers, and the ululating howls of child jockeys as they pounded over the finish line in bareback horse races. We spent half a day in the desert, looking for the camp of the region's best horse trader. We interviewed him in a cool, shadowy yurt, crowded with 16 members of his family, all silent as they passed around bowls of fermented mare's milk.. He was a tall man of great modesty and delicacy. When our reporter asked him what he hoped for in the big race, he said he hoped he would come in second to Erdenejargal's white stallion, which was the fastest in the neighborhood. He said he hoped nobody got hurt, and he wished that people would remember not to drink so much vodka.

In Dalanzadgad I heard a curious story from a man named Batbold. (Most Mongols use only one name). He was a former Communist official who'd become a silversmith after the collapse of the government, making traditional silver ornaments for saddles and bridles. He told me there was said to be a crescent-shaped cliff to the south of town, not far from the Chinese border, where, if you stood in exactly the right place, you could hear radio signals coming from the rock. We never got time to go there.

About halfway through my time in Mongolia, I began to see patterns emerging in the stories that people told me. People my age tended to talk nostalgically about Socialism. It was their youth, after all. They talked about how hard it had had been to make the transition to the market economy. People in their 20s and 30s talked about how strange it was to have been raised Red, but then tossed into the economic chaos when they should have been getting their first job. Some of them survived as smugglers and black marketeers. It was *This Mongolian Life*. It was Stud's Terkel's *Working* turned upside down. It was the stuff of radio documentaries.

I wrote a grant request to the Soros Foundation, proposing a nation-wide oral history project that would record people's stories as they made it, or didn't make it, through the great transition. I asked for minidisk recording kits, computers, editing software, and training money. In the end, Soros gave us enough to equip and train seven stations.

I get e-mails from time to time from Ganhuyag, my former translator. He tells me that the oral history project is going well, and that the stations are putting their new equipment to good use. I'd like to get back there sometime and see how things are going for myself. I'd like to go back and find out whether you really can hear radio voices in the rocks of that strange cliff.

Getting Out

Sometimes it pays to get the hell out. For one thing, I've always found that my reputation is enhanced when I'm away from my usual haunts for a while, whereas it tends to tarnish a bit when I'm present. For another, being away refreshed me and restored my enthusiasm for radio. Teaching something you know from long experience makes you look at that experience with new eyes. Teaching something that's relatively new to you (like computer editing) makes you learn it with desperate alacrity.

The Knight International Press Fellowships are only one of the ways that you can go out and spread the gospel of good radio. If you'd like to find out more about the Knight program and others, check out the International Center for Journalists' Web site at **www.icfj.org**. One caution: the Knight program doesn't allow participants to file stories while they're on the fellowship. It's not designed to send reporters and producers to exotic locales where they can do their own thing. The ban on working forces you to concentrate on your teaching and your students, which is what this program is all about. It's probably not necessary to add that the program is not designed to make you rich, either, although it does pay generous expenses and an honorarium. We did fine in Mongolia, where living expenses are cheap. We were a little short of cash for awhile when we got back, but that just meant I've had to put off fixing the muffler on my car. So far I've managed to evade the Authorities.

Maybe it's time to unravel some of the strands that might be good discussion topics in the coming month. I'm obviously interested in the idea of getting away, whether it's "lighting out for the territories," like Huck Finn, or just doing something that demands a steeper learning curve at home. I'm curious about how we Americans regard the ideas of Experience and Adventure. I'm interested in storytelling, and how good storytelling works, especially on the radio. (I'm fascinated by the mechanics of storytelling: dramatic structure, suspense building, patterns, timing and the like.) I'm also interested in the mechanics of good teaching. I'd like to hear from people who teach practical skills, such as cooking, welding and radio production that can transcend themselves and become art.

A Conversation w/ Corey Flintoff

Absolutely No Paper-Shredding Ambi in the Enron Piece, Got That?
Julia Barton - May 13, 2002 - #3

Did you find that Mongolians would react differently to certain elements of radio production? When I taught a radio workshop in Armenia, one student was adamant that it was "disrespectful" to use ambience in any stories about serious topics, i.e. an investigative piece. She just associated it with light, frivolous reporting. Then there are issues of what's respectful in an interview situation, and what sort of language (formal newspeak or everyday slang) radio announcers should use. I'd love to hear whether any of this was an issue for you in Mongolia.

More Important, How Are They On Sally Field?
william warner - May 15, 2002 - #4

What was the atmosphere like during the war in Afghanistan? Was the news coverage pointed or slanted in any way? Do Mongolians like Americans, or do they pay as little attention to us as I do to them?

Levels of Curiosity
Susan Jenkins - May 17, 2002 - #5

I just returned from my own "getting out" in Uzbekistan and Bangladesh...The two places couldn't be more different, but one thing was consistent--curiosity. I was mainly speaking in various events and workshops about photography, but had the chance to play my recent Transom piece (Only Us Down Here) and describe how it came about to some Bangladeshi photographers who were my captives for a workshop. They had never heard anything like it, but it clearly excited them to know that this kind of thing can be done.

The curiosity levels in Uzbekistan were more, er, restrained...
How much resistance or openness did you find? What seemed to influence the level of curiosity, and how did you negotiate that?

You Sporting a Steeple-Top in the Booth or What?
Jay Allison - May 20, 2002 - #6

Did your trip to Mongolia affect you at all in the way you are on the air -- your voice, your writing, your thinking?

And I Always Miss My Special Blankie
helen woodward - May 20, 2002 - #7

Every time I go somewhere foreign (not necessarily outside of the US) it's like all your senses are given a shake up, even the most basic of one's needs that would normally be taken care of without a second thought require you to reach out in a way that one doesn't have to at "home" and try and be understood; things smell more intensely, food tastes better, the smallest interactions require more of you, and when you come back things seem different too.

all of which leads to some questions: what did you miss while you were away, and what didn't you miss that you expected to? what felt different when you came home? was it difficult/sad to get back into the swing of npr things?

Decorative vs. Structural Sounds
Corey Flintoff - May 20, 2002 - #8

Julia [#3],
I didn't find that Mongols were resistant to using ambience, music, etc., in news stories, but I think your Armenian student raises a provocative question: namely, are we teaching our students to use sound in the most meaningful ways? My Mongolian students, like many others I've encountered, were inclined to use sound as decoration, rather than support for the meat of the story. Having been guilty of this myself, I tend to be fairly sensitive about it. I use the example of good television reporting, where the text doesn't just comment on the pictures and the pictures don't just illustrate the text. In good television reporting, the text and the pictures should tell parallel stories that enhance each other. Same with sound and acts 'n tracks. The sound establishes things like place, time, emotional temperature, etc., at the same time it moves that narrative forward, providing transitions and punctuation. It's tough to get all this across until you've constructed a good example in your students' language. Sometimes it's easier to show how badly chosen sound just detracts from and confuses the message in the rest of the story. I suppose that would fit the Armenian student's idea of disrespect.

Formality of language was an issue in Mongolia. In fact, older people frequently criticized young reporters and announcers for using slang. Like other language groups, though, Mongols have the myth that there was once a "high" language that has steadily degenerated down to the present, so I suppose they see radio as a further corruption. I hate the newspeak that we create every day here in Washington, but I don't like slang, either, since both of them are really just about the creation of clichés. I tend to favor the sparest language for newscasting, and something a bit short of Scott Simonesque phrase-making for reporter pieces.

Do The Pilots Wave Back or Just Drop Peanuts and Tang?
Corey Flintoff - May 20, 2002 - #9

William [#4],
Mongols do like Americans. It's culturally inappropriate to talk about death, but Mongolian friends overcame that to express their sympathy for the victims of the September 11 attacks. I didn't notice that coverage of the Afghan War was slanted in one direction or another, but it seemed very distant. The main impact of the Afghan War in Mongolia is that commercial airplane flights were diverted into Mongolian air space. Every additional contrail that you saw in the Mongolian sky was worth about $750 dollars to the government. People out on the steppe would look up at passing planes, smile & wave.

Making An Image
Corey Flintoff - May 20, 2002 - #10

Susan [#5],
I think photography and radio reporting have a lot in common, and in fact I know quite a few radio people who are also good photographers (Karen Michel, for one). There's something about the

sensitivity it takes to walk up to someone and make an image of them, whether it's photo or sound. How do you get that image to be natural, not stilted by your own presence? I'm far too shy to be a good photographer, because I hesitate to ask people if I can take their pictures, but somehow a microphone doesn't seem so intimidating.

I encountered a lot of curiosity on the part of students, who asked a lot of questions about how reporters in the U-S handle issues like anonymous sourcing. Since most of them work in very small towns, most of their sources wanted to be anonymous, with all the attendant problems.

I also encountered er, restraint among the older, more Socialist reporters. It turned out that they'd had a lot of training, and they were fond of saying "Oh we've done this before. This is nothing new." Then, of course, you'd find they didn't know how to do something when it came to a practical exercise.

The level of curiosity seemed to hinge on peoples' willingness and ability to change. I spent a lot of time asking people what their visions were for their radio programs, what they wanted to accomplish, and tried to go from there.

Relaying Is Replacing
Viki Merrick - May 22, 2002 - #11

How's your Mongolian? Based on your story, I'm assuming it's not too fluent. I am fascinated by the thought of teaching something that involves the actual use of language without speaking that language. How do you know WHEN ambi distracts from spoken content or enhances it, how do you revel in a soundbite, or share the reveling or the distraction? This has got to be verrrry difficult and challenging. I don't mean to be flip, but "a translator" can't be a good enough answer. I've done a lot of translating in news and documentary and that's a lot different because I am RELAYING and have replaced the genuine thing. Surely you have some good stories to share on this aspect of teaching.

Nuances of Emotion
Corey Flintoff - May 24, 2002 - #12

You're right. I could barely ask my way to the bathroom in Mongolian (assuming there had been one), much less grasp the subtleties of a soundbite. (And yet, having had so many stories translated to me, I now imagine them as if I had heard them directly in English, complete with all the verbal tics and ornamentation of the original storytellers. I imagine that's because I had plenty of time to study people's faces as they talked, so I was able to supply many of the nuances of emotion, humor and so forth, that might not have come through in a translated sound bite or a transcript.)

As far as teaching was concerned, I had to fall back on the way a particular soundbite appeared to affect the Mongol listeners in the room. I'd ask my students what the cut told about the speaker, above and beyond the information content of the words alone. That is, can you tell the person's age, their emotional state, their truthfulness, what they might look like, etc. I encouraged them to choose

bites that offered multiple levels of content. After all, the narrator can always relate "facts" and "information," but good interview cuts can express so much more.

It's interesting that you, as a translator, seem not to completely trust translation. What kinds of warnings would you offer a reporter or documentarian who's working through a translator?

After The Headline
Jeremy Hobson - May 25, 2002 - #13

I have a couple of questions about newscast writing--since that's one of my tasks in Boston. We try to keep most stories to 20 seconds...which makes it difficult to sum up the basic facts of a story that has new developments. For instance, when there is a new allegation against defrocked-priest John Geoghan, there is hardly any time to write about what Geoghan was defrocked for...in case some listeners are unaware (which I'm sure some are). How do you decide what to include as background information, and how do you and your fellow newscasters coordinate what background information is being read on air throughout the day/week/month? Certainly there are many stories that are only covered in the newscasts, and there are some listeners who rely solely on NPR for information. Therefore, you provide them with the only information they receive on some stories. So how do you decide what and how often to tell them information that is a sentence or two after the headline. Also, as far as breaking news is concerned--how come NPR newscasters don't sound alarmed when they are reporting on planes hitting the WTC (not that that's a bad thing--I'm just wondering)? Are you guys told not to sound too surprised on the air?

The Benefit of Human Stuff
Viki Merrick - May 28, 2002 - #14

Corey - what a great answer for me to chew on [#12]. I was intrigued because in your manifesto you never mentioned language as an impediment to your teaching and I see by your response that it wasn't ! Your approach to teaching based on the listeners' interpretations is fascinating and I'm curious about discrepancies you might have encountered among their responses...

You took your lead by WATCHING the faces as they spoke. If one of our senses is shut down, we move on to the next. Non-visual translation is often void of innuendo and subtext, people saying one innocuous thing with a wry smile brings in another meaning - That's why v/o's often sound so, uh...diplomatic.

It's interesting that official simultaneous translating is the most difficult skill to acquire because you do it without the benefit of human stuff- vibes, gestures, eye contact. You'd think it would be easier because you only have to deal with THE WORDS, no need for ALSO having to interpret intent or emotion. Verbal communication carries stuff with it hopefully, it's supposed to (hence our affection for good radio).

In translation, if you remove that human presence it's just EXTREMELY difficult to interpret, never mind simultaneously. Once you "achieve" that skill - it becomes like breathing.

I wasn't trying to send out a signal flare on translators - just that no matter how keen I am in my observation as a translator, the soundbite becomes mine, dressed from MY baggage. I've heard lots of translations where I've thought - hmm I wouldn't have said that or I would have said this. it's not that it's WRONG, it's just slightly different, ever so slightly different. If I were to issue a warning, I'd just tell them to pay very close attention to body language, demeanor, tone - all the stuff you did when you couldn't understand the words - so that when the story gets told some of the original might be preserved. It's a subtle thing, but the best reporters I worked with overseas were sensitive to it and would comment something like: well he's SAYING this but he SEEMS a little antsy...

I admire your undaunted attitude about going to teach this kind of language sensitive stuff in a tongue about as similar to yours as Urdu. It's certainly not quite like teaching the how-to's of growing corn, or building a house. Before you left on your teaching adventure to Mongolia, were you at all worried about this language thing - how on earth does one "plan" for this?

The Reduction to Absurdity
Corey Flintoff - May 28, 2002 - #16

Jeremy [#13],
You've hit on one of the hardest things about this peculiar little craft of writing newscasts: deciding how much context to provide for any given story. It's neither useful to the listener nor fair to recite facts without context. Witness the Middle East conflict. If you don't provide political and social context for what's going on, your coverage just turns into a litany of horrors. Since we do hourly newscasts, it's possible to reduce many stories to just a couple lines of new information and a couple lines of background, with the hope that we can flesh a story out over several hours. In the case of John Geoghan, the background is always more or less the same "...convicted of child rape," or "accused of molesting as many as X number of children." The reduction to absurdity comes when we try to distill the background into a catchy adjectival phrase, such as "American Taliban" John Walker Lindh. Obviously that doesn't characterize the guy for anyone who doesn't know the story, and it includes a pre-judgment that his lawyers would probably quarrel with. It doesn't help to try to fudge the judgment, either, as a lot of newspeople do, by calling him "suspected or so-called American Taliban..." I think the only way to avoid this kind of stuff is be suspicious anytime American journalists seem to settle on a convenient cliché for describing people. Getting back to the issue of writing short while providing background, though, I think the simplest approach is best. I try to think about how I'd blurt a story out to a friend of mine, "Guess what!...," because the story tends to fall into a natural order that way, with the newest or most important fact first.

The newscasters at NPR don't consult much on how much background to give a story. We all work such different shifts that we don't get to see each other that much, but we do listen to each other newscasts.

Newscasting is a funny form of rhetoric that doesn't allow much space for expressing your personality. I try to avoid showing too much emotion, just because most emotional reactions are judgmental.

Story Radar Trigged By Hives, Urge to Sing Gershwin
Alison Freeland - June 1, 2002 - #18

Corey, I've been working on a story for Transom, and therefore thinking about how to recognize a good story when we come across it. I was wondering what triggers your story radar. Can you identify the elements that get your attention in a situation, and tell you you've got a good one on your hands?

Also, I filled in recently producing the national and local news at the top of the hour on a news/talk radio station. I began to think humans may not be built to digest such quantity of information, much of it startling or disturbing, from so many locations, multiple times a day. Do you struggle with this thought as a news presenter?

Reliable Radar: Passing the Ira Test
Corey Flintoff - June 3, 2002 - #19

My most reliable story radar is the gossip test. Would I tell a story to my wife or a friend? Have I spent more than a few minutes thinking about it myself? Did it move me in some way; i.e., cheer me up, make me uneasy, make me mad? Does a story seem credible? Sometimes you can get a good angle by challenging some piece of gossip that's making the rounds but doesn't seem quite plausible. Does a story surprise you? Does it thwart your expectations in some interesting way? Ira Glass likes to say he knows he's onto a good story when he realizes it's not turning out the way he expected.

On the second topic, I agree with you -- there's way too much information out here, and it's unsettling at best. Research has shown that people who regularly watch television news tend to be more anxious, more pessimistic, more susceptible to stress. People can probably absorb one or two disturbing stories at a time, but a whole list (that is, a newscast) might just be hazardous to your health.

NPR does a lot of political stories, which at least deal with issues you can do something about (vote, write a letter, etc.), as opposed to murders and disasters, which you can only fret about.

The Sound of Place
Susan Jenkins - June 4, 2002 - #21

One of the things I really like about radio is the way it can set up a sense of place through sound...especially when it's an unfamiliar place. Here we're so globally oriented that it's just as often sound from across the world as one in our own backyard. Were the Mongolian radio producers interested in sense of place? And was it mainly local?

CAMERA Controversy
Corey Flintoff - June 11, 2002 - #23

I have a question: what do you think about the Israeli-Palestinian-NPR conflict. I'm referring to the CAMERA-led boycott of WBUR for its (and particularly NPR's) allegedly Palestinian leanings. This has been one of the biggest and most difficult sources of controversy and heartache for us at NPR. I'm curious about how other people perceive it.

A Bait More Deliberate
Corey Flintoff - June 11, 2002 - #25

Jay [#6],
Actually, We all -- Diana, Claire and I -- thought we were going to be irrevocably changed by this experience, maybe so much so that we could never go back to our old ways. The quick answer to that was "Naawwwwwww." We're pretty much the same as we were. The changes turned out to be far more subtle. For instance, having been in a culture that was less transparent to us (not opaque, exactly, but more like translucent), we learned not to judge people and events so quickly. We're more likely to wait and see what unfolds. That's how I feel about news, as well -- which may not be such a good thing in someone whose job it is to produce as-it-happens headline news. I think more things ought to be allowed to unfold a bit before we start yapping about them on the air. Take the guy accused of plotting to set off a "dirty" radioactive bomb. All the media leapt to that bait like a trout jumping for a fly, which perfectly served the interests of John Ashcroft, et. al. Since there was comparatively little information about Abdullah al-Muhahjir (or Joe Padilla), we trotted out mini treatises on the possibilities of a dirty bomb attack, such as where the radiation might drift if it were set off in downtown Washington (according to the Washington Post, it would go right over my house). So far, nobody has really challenged the government's case against this guy. So, I guess the long answer is that exposure to another culture, to other levels of ambiguity, has made me a bit more deliberate in the way I respond.

Since I spent a lot of time preaching about how announcers should be more aware of the intimacy of the medium, I also try to remember that I'm really only talking to one person at a time when I'm on the air, and tone down the big announcer-voice rhetoric we all fall into.

The Big Isolating Footprint
Corey Flintoff - June 11, 2002 - #26

Helen [#7],
Other than friends, we didn't miss all that much when we were away, but then, six months isn't long...The big footprint in the middle of our Mongolian experience (as in everyone else's) was, of course, September 11th. Once we'd gotten over the initial shock, we felt profoundly isolated from our friends in New York and D.C., and we realized fairly quickly that they'd been through something we'd never be able to completely fathom. We felt we were missing out on that fleeting sense of unity and purpose that held everyone together. I really missed being with my colleagues at NPR, sharing in the rush of pulling together on a huge story. (Selfish reactions, it's true, and that's another of the disadvantages of being away: everyone's reactions are selfish, or at least self-centered, but when you're on the scene, you can at least ameliorate your own self-centeredness by doing something to help other people.)

It wasn't that hard to get back into the swing of things at NPR. The advantage of doing daily news is that it starts fresh every day.

Beyond And Between The Poles
kimberly - June 11, 2002 - #27

re the exchange b/t Corey and Alison [#18 and #19]...
I love the idea that part of Corey's test for " is it a good story" is the gossip test - as an obsessive compulsive eavesdropper I can appreciate that....

as for too much information....I can hardly watch tv news because it infuriates me how quickly it skips from one thing to the next, and years ago i stopped waking up to NPR, even, because of the brevity of too many of the reports... with the little bits and pieces, you hear just enough to get exasperated, and then they are moving on to the next thing, and its like some kind of post-traumatic stress syndrome induced from news watching...I think it is really less disturbing to give people much larger chunks of information around fewer topics, because the issues get a chance to be fleshed out and put into a context, and even for less-than-pleasant topics, having that context maybe lends a kind of understanding that you can't get from the avalanche method of news reporting.

I know this isn't practical and it certainly isn't marketable, but I'd prefer my news in large chunks over several hours, rather than small bits repeated every 15/30/60 minutes...But then the question is, what distinguishes news from documentary, and what about what is in between and beyond those two poles?

Patterns and Mechanics
Sydney Lewis - June 11, 2002 - #28

You mention beginning to see patterns emerging in the stories that people told you, stories that came out of people's reactions to the changes in their economic/political landscape...What sense did you have of young people's sense of the outer world in terms of the stories, or were they all pretty much Mongolian centered? I know nada about what level of exposure to world events the average Mongolian has. I'm also curious about how you taught the mechanics of storytelling -- "dramatic structure, suspense building, patterns, timing and the like" -- while working in a foreign language. The rhythm of language and life must have been so foreign to your ears and being. It seems daunting to work at a level beyond assessing how much information any speaker's voice and words carry.

No Bleating, No Clinking?
Corey Flintoff - June 11, 2002 - #29

Susan [#21],
Mongolian radio producers were very interested in a sense of place. Maybe it's a function of living in a largely nomadic society, but people wanted to be quite precise about where they were. Of

course, the same cues that evoke a place to us don't always work for them. For instance, I wanted my reporters to use a lot of nomadic camp sounds, such as the clink of horse gear, the rattle of a stove, kids playing, goats bleating, etc. That was rich, exotic sound to me, but it was quite ordinary, generic stuff to my reporters, who couldn't see much point in using it. Their idea of locating a place was mainly verbal description; i.e.; "the other side of Black Mountain, just beyond Munkhjargal's well."

I'll Have A Side of Economy, Please
Corey Flintoff - June 11, 2002 - #30

Kimberly [#27],
You're right (and here I'm undercutting my own job again), fewer topics and more information would probably be healthier for us as news consumers. That, after all, is how people exchange information in indigenous societies -- leisurely talk and story-telling. I suppose radio talk shows and C-Span satisfy some of that kind of demand. On the other hand, even if the really in-depth news coverage you're talking about were available, you'd still need a menu, and I guess that's what newscasts are for.

Pissed or Positive?
Jay Allison - June 12, 2002 - #31

Regarding this issue you raised above [#23]:
"...the CAMERA-led boycott of WBUR for its (and particularly NPR's) allegedly Palestinian leanings. This has been one of the biggest and most difficult sources of controversy and heartache for us at NPR. I'm curious about how other people perceive it."

I'm wondering... do the CAMERA-type tactics **work**? Does NPR tend to self-censor or second guess as a result? Or does it piss off the staff and make them disregard the criticism as purely biased and unfounded? Or does it actually make the news organization more careful, which could be positive? Again, does the tactic work?

Mongols Have Wide View, Know Pan Shots, Too
Corey Flintoff - June 13, 2002 - #32

Sydney [#28],
Mongols actually have a pretty wide view of the world, except that it's from the perspective of the former Eastern bloc. People who were Communist Party functionaries before the transition all spoke Russian and almost all traveled to Eastern Europe. Most provincial towns still get a channel or two of Russian TV (mostly wonderfully bad comedy/variety shows). Ulaanbaatar gets around 20 channels of cable TV, only about 3 of which are Mongolian. The rest include BBC, French, Italian, Chinese, Russian, Korean and occasionally even CNN. Their newspapers are very tabloidy, so international news is big on sensational stuff, not very big on policy. The Mongols are such a small population that they have to take a pretty wide view of the world. American news always seems very parochial to foreigners, and they're right.

I talked about the mechanics of storytelling in movie terms. Mongolia had a small but highly productive movie industry in Socialist days, and some of the movies were very well done, by Russian-trained directors. Movies were an important propaganda vehicle and they were (and still are) shown all over the country, even in rural settlements, so people know their movie vocabulary. I'd start out by telling students to imagine their piece as a small movie, with a beginning that sets up the action, a clearly defined problem, conflict or suspense, action, and maybe even resolution. They got it with no problem.

Uncovered Places
Julia Barton - June 25, 2002 - #43

Just a thought on American provincialism: last time I was in Ukraine, some journalism students asked about how their country was covered in the U.S. press. A fair question, which we all had to answer with an embarrassed, "Well, it ISN'T covered for the most part." The students looked crestfallen. It made me realize again the importance of foreign correspondents and editors--like the ones in public radio--who still take features, not just news, from places "no one has heard of."

Balance Chilling Truth?
Corey Flintoff - June 13, 2002 - #33

Jay [#31],
Actually the CAMERA-style tactics do work. We have become much more careful, which is good, but I think it can also have a chilling effect on reporters' willingness to call it as they see it. The search for balance can also drain some of the color and passion out of our coverage, too. For instance, do we do a poignant story about a Palestinian family if we're not sure we can get an equally powerful story about Israelis sometime soon? That's just a hypothetical, of course. I don't have to make those kinds of editorial decisions and I'm not privy to the discussions of people who do.

We're in the midst of analyzing all our Mideast coverage for the next several weeks to see whether it really is accurate and fair.

Congressman Brad Sherman (D-CA) has issued a press release saying that NPR President Kevin Klose agreed to the survey last month. Sherman is one of those who accuses NPR of "a serious imbalance" in its Middle East coverage.

"Balance" seems to me to be a dangerously vague word. Do you define it to mean that each point of view should get minute-by-minute equivalence in the amount of air time devoted to it? Do we shoot for balance in the emotional tone or temperature of each side? Or, as CAMERA would have it, is the issue not about "balance" but about "truth." One of the reasons the Middle East conflict is so intractable, it seems to me is that each side sees what it considers to be manifest truth, and can't understand why any reasonable person would see it differently.

Voice Conscious
Nannette - June 15, 2002 - #36

Can you say anything about your perceptions, your awareness of your voice on the air and off? I think your voice is bigger than life while not sounding "put-on." How conscious of it are you now? How did you/do you work at it? Do you have to think about balancing your thoughts about your breath, the meaning... and what?

Boycott or Blackmail?
Jackson Braider - June 16, 2002 - #37

I am intrigued by the notion that the impact of CAMERA, Honestreporting.org, etc. has prompted closer scrutiny at NPR of our coverage of the Middle East. In a tit-for-tat environment, surely, there are two sides to cover.

I'm feeling somehow that we are failing here. WBUR is getting hammered because it happens to be in the place that CAMERA calls "home". But news is news is news -- grantor credits shouldn't be (at least, I don't think so) a determining factor as to the content of that news.

My first sense is that NPR should be approaching Soros for a GC that addresses "a free press." At the very least, NPR listeners should be offered an opportunity to boycott those who boycott us because... well, no one outside the news should be determining what the content of that news should be.

My sense is that what CAMERA is doing is not so much boycott as blackmail.

Sprezzatura
Corey Flintoff - June 17, 2002 - #38

Nannette [#36],
I found myself unaccountably reluctant to talk about being aware of my voice until I realized that I'm a big adherent of the Italian concept of Sprezzatura, which means something like making a difficult art or craft seem effortless. Of course, voice work isn't effortless. I've been working at it throughout my career, and I've had some good coaching, too, from people like Karen Michel and Audrey Welles. The bigger than life quality stems from the fact that news writing is necessarily different from ordinary storytelling. The information content is much denser, so you find yourself trying to create a rhetoric that sounds conversational while conveying a lot of stuff. Then, I do think about the performance aspects of it, too, trying to make it expressive and conversational. When I read, I have a tendency to bob my head like one of those dogs in the back windows of people's cars, and I tend to make a lot of monkey-like facial expressions, too. Lately, I've had a lot more appreciation of good pacing, the ability to make nicely timed pauses at the end of a thought, etc., and the willingness to let silence work for you. Since you can't increase your volume to emphasize certain words or phrases, you have to learn to lean on those elements, to stretch them slightly, to draw them out. The other thing is to find your natural timbre and let your reading voice fall into it. I

don't know how to teach that. I think it's just a matter of listening to your own throat. I have a lot of favorite on-air voices. Aside from the most obvious ones, like Studs Terkel and Scott Simon, I like Steve Inskeep, Jackie Lyden (hers is a real theatrical, 1930s & 40s actress voice)Ira Glass, Madeleine Brand....

Newscasting News: KestenbaumChadwickBradley Separated at Birth
m lamp - June 18, 2002 - #39

I wonder if, just as a report by D.Kestenbaum is not the same as one by say, B.Bradley or A.Chadwick -- do hourly newscasts reflect something of the newscaster? Other than the newscaster's voice, I mean. Of course there is nothing of the newscaster's personal bias or opinion -- but is there...something? Something in the choice or weight of stories, some turn of phrase that makes a newscast uniquely Flintoff, unmistakably Stasio? Or do you (I mean collectively) aim for near anonymity, keeping each cast carefully consistent with the whole body of newscasts, regardless of who writes or reads it?

By the way, the "NPR Quarterly" article, "The News is Next" in which you articulate your "news haiku" philosophy is widely posted and often re-read around the old newsroom here in Denver [Colorado Public Radio].

Hair Triggered by Tiny Percentage
Corey Flintoff - June 18, 2002 - #40

Jackson [#37],
You express the dilemma for NPR and its member stations very well. It's good that we're scrutinizing our coverage more closely. I doubt that it will ever please CAMERA or other vehement critics, but it makes us a lot more sensitive to the impact, and especially the emotional impact of our coverage. News organizations tend to be hair-trigger sensitive to criticism, and we tend to forget that the most passionate responders are only a tiny percentage of the listenership.

A lot of CAMERA's complaints are "kill-the-messenger" responses: that is, if we quote Palestinians calling their suicide bombers "martyrs" or lamenting that the bombers' bodies aren't returned, CAMERA and its adherents act as if the words and the sentiments are ours. We also get a lot of emails and letters from people who simply and justifiably want to address what the other side has said.

Laid Back Diversity Amidst Urgent Wires
Corey Flintoff - June 18, 2002 - #41

m [#39],
It's actually embarrassing how little coordination there is among newscasters at NPR, so yes, the newscasts do reflect each person's choices. (Although it's less so these days, when the newscasts are shorter and everyone has to pretty much reflect whatever's urgent on the wire). Being a Westerner, for instance, I think I tend to use more Western stories than Ann Taylor, who comes from Tennessee

by way of Washington and New York. It's harder to get Easterners interested in federal lands issues, water rights, etc. Frank comes from Buffalo (as do John Stempin and Rob Schaefer, the evening producer). I think they're more sensitive to Midwestern coverage. Makes a good case for diversity in the newsroom, anyway.

Craig Windham comes from a commercial news background, as does Ann Taylor. Ann Boozell worked for VOA for a long time. I think all those experiences affect our styles, even though we do try for that more laid-back NPR sound.

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

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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