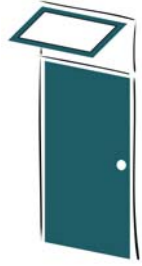


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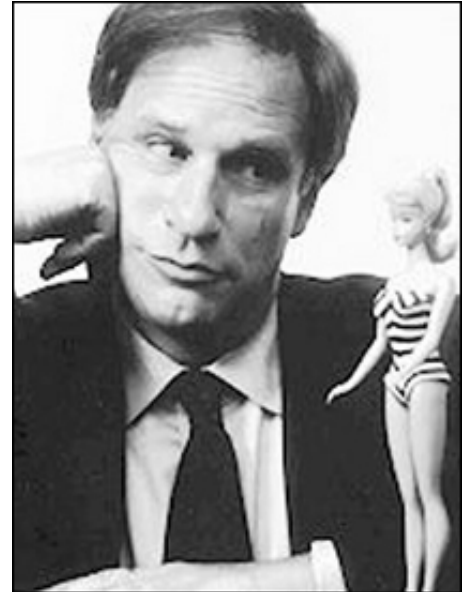


Edited by Sydney Lewis

Robert Krulwich's Topic

About Robert Krulwich

Robert Krulwich is a network correspondent for ABC News, appearing regularly on *Nightline*. He also reports for *ABC World News Tonight*, *Prime Time Live* and *Good Morning America*. His specialty is explaining complex news -- economics, technology, science -- in a style that is clear, compelling and entertaining. With Ted Koppel, he co-hosted the eight-part prime time series, *Brave New World*, which probed the "eight biggest questions facing human kind." With Peter Jennings, he produced an animated history of Bosnia for a children's special. With Barbara Walters, he explored possible cures for cancer and reported on the AIDS epidemic.



Krulwich has been called "the most inventive network reporter in television" by *TV Guide*, "the man who makes the dismal science swing," by the *Washington Journalism Review*, and "the man who simplifies without being simple," by *New York* magazine.

He is a correspondent on the PBS investigative series, *Frontline*, where he won a Dupont Award for his coverage of campaign finance in the 1992 presidential campaign, a national Emmy for his investigation of privacy on the Internet, and a George Polk Award for an investigation on the savings and loan scandal.

Krulwich formerly anchored a cultural affairs series on PBS (and a simultaneous series on the BBC) called *The Edge*. *GQ* called the series "cocky, fearless, and brazenly sophisticated." He has also hosted *Live at Lincoln Center* and appeared on Jay Leno's premier *Tonight Show* broadcast.

Before joining ABC in 1994, Krulwich appeared regularly on CBS *This Morning*, *48 Hours* and CBS' *Nightwatch with Charlie Rose*. During the Gulf War, he co-anchored the CBS program, *America Tonight*. From 1978 to 1985, he was Business and Economics correspondent for National Public Radio. He still contributes to NPR and, once a year, with friends, Jane Curtin, Buck Henry and Tony Hendra, he hosts a semi-fictional year-in-review called *Backfire*. In 1995, the group performed at the White House at the invitation of President and Mrs. Clinton.

He has received numerous awards for his reporting, including four consecutive Gainsbrugh Awards from the Economics Broadcasting Association, a Champion Award from the Amos Tuck Business School and PBS's special award for Programming Excellence. His ABC Special on Barbie,

a cultural history of the world famous doll, also won a national Emmy. *TV Guide* named Krulwich to its "All Star" reporting team and *Esquire* placed him in its Esquire Registry in 1989. In 1974, Krulwich covered the Watergate Hearings for Pacifica Radio and, in 1976, he was Washington bureau chief for *Rolling Stone*.

Krulwich received a bachelor's degree in US History from Oberlin College and a Juris Doctorate from Columbia Law School. He lives in New York City with his wife, Tamar Lewin, a national reporter for *The New York Times*. They have two children, Jesse and Nora Ann. Mr. Krulwich takes special pride in coaching Nora's basketball team, which is moving closer and closer to a winning season.

Intro by Jay Allison

Whenever there is reference to the Golden Age of Public Radio, if such a thing indeed has passed, the name of Robert Krulwich is invoked. Robert's radio work is full of attributes we still aspire to: it's smart, funny, distinctive, full of heart. Back when everyone was having a lot of fun inventing public radio, Robert seemed to be having the most. His character pieces, his mock dramas, his unforgettable explanations of complex phenomenon are still proudly pulled out for display when we want to remind ourselves... "**This** is what sets us apart."

Of course, it isn't "us," it's Robert. His simple narrative lesson is that he tells stories like **himself**. He did it on the radio and now he does it on TV.

Robert Krulwich's Manifesto

Introduction

My broadcast career began early, in the bathtub. I was four, maybe five, and I remember that if I positioned myself just right, I could see, in the chrome that encircled the faucet on the other end of the tub, a fractured reflection of myself.

That image, my face by the faucet, was the trigger. The instant I saw myself I was "on the air", which meant I would ball my left hand into a fist (the microphone), lower my voice as low as it would go, and with intense excitement I would, out loud (but not too out loud lest somebody notice), start telling short, vivid stories about my day to an audience of....well, of one: me.

I was in heaven. It wasn't just that I found myself so endlessly fascinating. What I really liked was hearing my life narrated in that VERY IMPORTANT tone that newscasters used to narrate everything: the rich voice, the this-just-in excitement, and the authoritative sign off: I called myself, why I don't know, maybe I was listening to Spanish radio, "Don Roberto" - ("This is Don Roberto reporting"). I could go on and on in the tub till my toes got all wrinkly.

The years passed.

I went to high school in New York, college at Oberlin in Ohio, law school at Columbia and after a summer at a mid Manhattan law firm where it occurred to me I was going to be a terrible lawyer, I asked myself "Is there anything else I can do? Anything?" And, by the way, it would be nice if I

loved doing it. And somewhere deep in my reptile brain, the cub reporter in the tub raised his hand and said, "How about journalism? You were great at that!"

So I listened to my inner Don Roberto and decided to try it in real life. My parents, naturally, were horrified. Worse, no one in broadcasting wanted me. I went from radio station to radio station from Connecticut to Washington, D.C. until, because I happened to be in the right place at exactly the right time -- it was a couch on East 62nd Street--I got a barely paying, temporary, one-time-only job at Pacifica, the left wing network of five subsistence public stations.

That was in 1974.

Since then I've been at *Rolling Stone Magazine*, NPR (near the beginning), public television, the BBC, ESPN, CBS television, and now ABC television, trying to recapture my glory days in warm-water broadcasting, which leads me to this, my kick-off essay:

WHY I LOVE RADIO (and TV)

with the obliging subtitle:

**BECAUSE IT MAKES ME FEEL SO, SO GOOD
AND SO, SO BAD
AND FROM HOUR TO HOUR I NEVER KNOW WHICH.**

Since most of you (this being Transom) are either contemplating, or are knee deep or up your necks in radio, what follows may be very familiar. But seeing it written down, knowing that someone else suffered and swooned just as you have, can be comforting and, for a few of you, evidence that you are not the only ones who are seriously insane.

PART ONE: What Makes Me Feel Good About Radio (and TV)

Good Thing #1

What I love (and also fear) is sitting down to a blank page with a maze of words and sounds, the raw stuff I have gathered as a reporter, and thinking: Now how do I do this?

The fact that I have done this before (at this point, thousands of times before) gives me no great advantage. Each story has its own, very specific, idiosyncratic logic, its own internal music. If I go wrong--I always go wrong, sometimes a little wrong, sometimes WAY wrong--it is not me who notices first. The tape notices. The voices, the sounds, make it very clear they are uncomfortable. They don't like each other's company, not in THIS way, and it is almost like I can hear them complaining, "No....no..." This all but invisible conversation (try explaining it to another human) is so deeply mysterious and so personal and so unerring, as much as I hate (really hate) losing my way, I love the process of finding my way back. Happily, because I have done this for a long time, I have a hunch (not always, and not when there is a hard deadline and not when I've had too little sleep and I am exhausted) that somehow or other, I will figure it out. I will make it make sense.

Good Thing Number Two

I also like the happy accidents, the startling moments when, for whatever reason, you put X next to Y where it wasn't meant to be, you roll tape and ooooohhh... it stands up and says "We LIKE this!" Something deep down starts to tingle.

Good Thing Number Three

I still like it when something I have written down, something that has lain on a page or a screen is suddenly given breath and comes alive. It's a Gepetto thing: I've got this idea in my head. I have built it carefully. I have tried to love it into being, but the moment when I first hear it stir, when it animates, when the first paragraph or the first moment comes spooling into being, the voices, sounds, narration all flowing, even now, thousands of stories later, I am still slightly amazed.

Good Thing Number Four

And, of course, I love when I am good. I love discovering that I have left an image, an idea, a new connection in tens of thousands of heads and that in some of those heads the message stuck. Most of the time radio and tv stories flow by in a blur. People hear but don't remember, but when I'm good, days after the broadcast, a person across from me in a bus might say, "Hey, aren't you the guy who was talking about..." --there's always a pause here while they try to be sure they've got the right reporter, the right story--but if they go on to describe, even roughly, what I actually said, this is so rare and so wonderful, I feel like doing a little jig of joy.

PART TWO: What Makes Me Feel Bad About Radio (and tv)

Bad Thing Number One

...Not being able to start, not having the faintest idea which moment should lead, having six notions, all okay but none good enough; no wind at my back, no energy, having six to ten bad ideas balled up on the floor and I have to file in less than two hours.

Bad Thing Number Two

...Not having the time, the talent or the wit to tell the story as I felt it in all its subtle colors and suspecting that I will not, ever, have such talent and what was I thinking when I decided to do this for a living instead of valet parking or some vocation more suitable to my actual abilities...

Bad Thing Number Three

The fact that in the end you do this work alone. True, when it works that is YOU, indisputably you, talking on the radio and that is good, but when you are stuck, when you can't find your voice, you are the only one who can rescue yourself and if your muse is out of the building, there is no feeling quite so lonely.

Bad Thing Number Four

...and finally, those occasions when you finish a piece of work very sure that what you have written is true and beautiful and then it goes on the air and you wait for the congratulatory call,

the applause, the admiring glance and instead you get nothing but indifference and looks that seem uncomfortably close to pity.

That makes me very, very unhappy.
Every time.

The Bottom Line

The Bottom Line is that that you can do this for years, decades even, and it doesn't get any easier, it doesn't get more predictable, it keeps being lonely and every so often it makes you very, very happy or very, very sad. You never know which.

A Conversation with Robert Krulwich

Hell Is When The Pieces Say, "No."

Rich Finlinson - September 18, 2002 - #5

Great description of the heaven and hell of producing for broadcast.

It's like putting together a puzzle that no one's ever seen before. (And yet you have more of a clue than anyone else. If anyone is ever going to put this together and tell this story, it is going to be you.) There are pieces that fit together. But sometimes they change shapes on you.

Heaven: Pieces form groups and groups feel like introductions, conflicts, resolutions, insights, good byes. You work hard on the project for weeks. You submit it to a fledgling "All Things Considered" They air it. Mike Waters introduces the piece. You're on national radio at age 19.

Hell: The pieces don't really fit, after all.

And you're right, they do sort of talk to you, sometimes like you're a little kid and you just don't do puzzles very well.

I belong here. I want to be over there. Don't use me here. I'm the best, use me.
Don't forget about me. Ah, give me another chance.

And there's definitely anxiety involved. I like these dueling quotations about it:

-Anxiety is the handmaiden of creativity. --Chuck Jones

-Anxiety is a thin stream of fear trickling through the mind. If encouraged, it cuts a channel into which all other thoughts are drained. --Arthur Somers Roche

And The Pulse Is Racing

Robert Krulwich - September 19, 2002 - #12

Rich has put his finger on the pulse of what I'm saying. Anxiety is a given, and anxiety isn't a bad thing. You've just got to learn to live with it. Enjoy it, if you can.

I'm reminded of a Talk of Town I once read in the New Yorker Magazine. It was a conversation with Martin Scorsese. He was asked about his work in the editing room, what's it like? And he

answered, "It reminds me of painting. As a painter, you put one color against another color, but you never know what the feeling will be until you try it. There's no intellectual reason or concept behind it. It just feels better. So there's no way to relax when you're doing this stuff. There's no way to relax and say, "At least, here we know." You never know."

Golden Age This, Golden Age That Ira Glass - September 19, 2002 - #11

Whenever there is reference to the Golden Age of Public Radio ... Can I just lobby for us never using that phrase ever again? Even with qualifiers? Whenever I see it or hear about the goddamned "Golden Age," it just makes me mad. (And let's not even get started on the whole oldschool 1940's "Golden Age of Radio" Okay, except for Norman Corwin and Edward R Murrow the audience now is kajillions of times bigger than it was in the 1970's and 80's, we have competent reporters everywhere, there's space on the air for all sorts of little experiments and new shows, a whole new wave of smart interesting youngish people are getting intrigued with public radio. The only time I want to see or hear the phrase "The Golden Age of Public Radio" is if it's referring to the Age we're living through right now....Do I get a second on that?

Hey, We Meant Golden Robert Krulwich - September 19, 2002 - #13

No. No seconds from me. Golden Ages are unavoidable. They're silly, but people seem to need them. A Golden Age is whenever it was you were feeling real, real happy. So folks who joined public radio and got real, real happy in 1976-1983 (me), call that period a golden age, not a Golden Age like everybody should cover their hearts with their hands, just a golden age, lower case, a golden time for me. I'm very comfortable figuring that there are hundreds of thousands of different Golden Ages (or golden ages) happily coexisting, depending on who's speaking.

That said, Ira is completely right to say that then was then and now is now, and that misty romantic allusions are just that -- misty and romantic. Through a haze, Ed Murrow looks majestic. Re-listening to those reports from the rooftops in London, it occurs to me, what was extraordinary was that someone, for the first time, could talk to Americans from the heart of a foreign war As IT WAS Happening.

And as for Corwin-- I'm sure most of you reading this have no idea of who Norman Corwin is/was. But if you wanted Homer in modern form...a lyrical reporter who wrote and spoke like he was wearing a toga and sometimes was so spectacular you'd get dizzy listening and sometimes seems a little too old fashioned and oratorical....

When I Look In The Mirror, It's Your Face I See.... Phil Easley - September 19, 2002 - #10

Hey, are you the guy that did a radio story that followed a Panama hat on its journey from field to Fifth Avenue...adding value along the way? I stole that idea from you while working in public tv in West Virginia. I attempted to follow a lump of coal, explaining how its value increased with every process. It was a flop, actually, but that wasn't your fault. I just didn't really know how to pull it off. But I'm still almost beside myself with pride in how brilliant my, I mean our...well,

okay, your idea was. So, who do you steal from? C'mon, you must have stolen an idea at least once in your life...

Shameless and Clever
Robert Krulwich - September 19, 2002 - # 14

I steal with abandon.
I steal from friends, who tell me stuff.
I steal from obscure (at least I hope they're obscure) magazines.
I steal from npr (and hope nobody notices).
I steal from my mother (who's a great story teller).
I don't have much of a problem taking somebody else's idea. It seems to come out different when I fiddle with it anyway...so I don't think of it as bald-face stealing, I think of it the way the (defense) lawyers do: they have a fancy word for stealing: conversion.
I convert.

Him, Too
Ira Glass - September 20, 2002 - # 24

About a third of everything I did from the ages of 27 to 30 was basically a knock-off/tribute/steal/conversion of Alex Chadwick. When I was stuck on anything, I tried to imagine I was writing the interview questions or the script for him to perform. There are still a few big moves in my writing that come straight from him. I'd never heard anyone on the radio gesture at the kinds of ideas he'll just throw into a story, in passing. Seemed eminently stealable. I don't think there's anything wrong with that ...

Do The Rockets Ever Stall?
Nannette Drake Oldenbourg - September 19, 2002 - # 15

You always sound fascinated, and your excitement and interest is infectious. Are you beyond taking an assignment that is less than important or engrossing, or is there no such thing as a bad launching pad for curious and creative minds?

...Last Seen Wearing A Green Transom Sweatshirt And Red Adidas.
Robert Krulwich - September 19, 2002 - # 18

Sure there are lots of things I couldn't care less about.
When a boss says, "You!" (referring to me) "Go out and cover Blah/blah/blah [Translated: Something I just read in this morning's New York Times that really intrigued me and my colleagues here, which we want you to over again, sticking very closely to the New York Times version--or as we secretly call it, the "true" version of events--], I want to kill that boss. Or failing that, do him/her, some minor harm.

What I don't want to do is what the New York Times has already done...So what do I do? I hide. If I can. If they find me, I smile outwardly and inwardly scheme to write a different story. Then I go out and give them something they don't think they want.

Some of the time they like what I did anyway. Some of the time they hate what I did. Some of the time my piece will run. Some of the time my piece gets killed.

Can I build up a real enthusiasm for someone else's work? No. Can I turn someone else's idea around and make it my one? Usually. Do I hate getting my piece spiked? Yes. Do I love getting my piece (MY version) on? Often.

The best advice when this situation looms? Hide.

Forging Identities

Rich Finlinson - September 20, 2002 - # 23

Sometimes the "stealing" is more subtle...So Robert, my question is, has this ever happened to you? You thinking you're being you, but somewhere in the production process or when the story airs, you realize "that's not just me. That's me sounding a whole lot like Susan Stamberg?" Or "Oops, I just emulated Scott Simon?"

And when and if it does happen, and you still have the ability to do something about it, what do you do?

It's Just A Little Problem I Have...

Robert Krulwich - September 20, 2002 - # 26

Well I was actually thrown off national public radio in 1977 and kept off the air for a month because I inadvertently became the Secretary of State. President Jimmy Carter had just hired a guy named Zbigniew to be the head of the State Department. He was a Polish born American with a very heavy accent. Judy Miller (now Pulitzer Prize winning Judith Miller of the New York Times) was our chief diplomatic correspondent and she got an exclusive interview with Dr. Zbigniew Brzchinsky - or however it's spelled.

For some reason, an executive decided I should host the conversation. So I went into the studio, with Judy and with Zbigniew and we started talking. About ten minutes later I noticed Judy getting a darker and darker look on her face...Ten minutes after that the engineer's room began filling with frantic looking NPR executives (at that time, all former English teachers from small community colleges)...five minutes after that Judy using her lipstick as a pencil had hastily written "STOP THAT!!!!!" on a napkin and passed it to me. I had no idea what was wrong. It turns out I very gradually during the program had become.... Polish. Starting with my own voice and my slightly nasal New York english, I had increasingly acquired guttural vowels, then middle european pronunciations and after about ten minutes I had become an exact clone of the Secretary of State. Sort of like Zelig if you know your Woody Allen movies.

Since I had been warned the week before about this problem (I had gone to the Texas State Fair and become a Texan during my interviews), my behavior was not viewed as a medical problem, but as a willful and completely unacceptable attempt at satire. So I was benched.

How About Wildly Sane? Julia Barton - September 20, 2002 - # 28

I'm running around Russia on a fellowship...Teaching the technical stuff is relatively easy and fun here. What I don't understand is whether one can even talk about what makes for a good story. In Russia, that "isn't it awful?" type of story we hear so much on NPR (Welfare Reform Not Working, Environment Still Dirty, etc) just doesn't fly: everybody's got their own problems, and there's no core of middle-class listenership with lots of sympathy to spare for others.

What I think makes Robert Krulwich's stories, and even those on TAL, memorable is that they're not asking "isn't it awful?" but more like "isn't that wild?" I guess I came here just assuming that kind of approach makes for a good story. Except here, you interview anyone for 10 minutes and you've got a handful of wild stories that are also awful: somebody went to the gulag, someone was raised by their aunt whom they thought was their mother, somebody's gay but working for a politician who wants to create a new gulag for homosexuals. Etc.

The people I'm working with want to do stories that are more uplifting--not totally superficial, but definitely in the vein of "isn't that nice?" Which I find pretty annoying, but who am I to say that's not an important function for radio here, just to be sane and boring?

Anyway, that makes me wonder how and if you think about audience, Robert. Or do you just deal with the story and let the rest sort itself out?

The Krulwich Moves Robert Krulwich - September 22, 2002 - # 34

That's a fascinating question.

I know what it's like not to want to listen. Therefore, when I sit down to write, I sit down like a lover planning a seduction. This is not a witty metaphor... this is the real deal. I want to come on sly, on tiptoe; I don't announce my intentions (to discuss the genome); I don't use technical language until later, much later in the story; I come at my audience the way you'd come at a person in a bar or a party or a busy place where they have made themselves available. My job is to make them notice me...find me interesting, tantalizing; like any lover, I want their attention first, I want to get them comfortable; I want to get them in the mood, not prone, not right away, just relaxed, willing to let me go further, and then I want to put my hands on their minds...and minds, and get 'em excited, bit by bit, so they want a little more.

If they don't want to hear "down" stories, if the subject of floating corpses is a turn off, do you censor yourself to keep your audience? Should Julia avoid stories about gulags and gays who work for homophobes and concentrate on what the consultants call "good" news, picker uppers? My answer is no. My answer is stroke 'em early, disturb them later.

You can't be a news reporter if your principle mission is to make people feel good. Or confirm them in their beliefs. Because by definition what you want to tell them is NEW (three of the four letters of the business we're in) and new is unfamiliar and unfamiliar is rarely comforting. What I try to do is to come on softly...touch them, hold their hands and then, halfway, two thirds in, squeeze hard, hurt them just a little, get a touch more complex, a bit darker....disturb them. That's

the big word...DISTURB them. Make them shift a little in their world view to relieve the discomfort.

I seduce to disturb.

We All Want To Rob Bob

Joe Richman - September 20, 2002 - # 29

Robert please talk more about structure. Those little tape voices that sometimes get uncomfortable next to each other....well, that's fine if you can hear the damn voices. What I need is a machine that just structures radio stories for me. I would pay any price. I hate structure. It makes me sad and fearful and scared (am I starting to sound like Krulwich in that last sentence? I think I am starting to type with a Polish accent.)

Templates and Visions

Ira Glass - September 22, 2002 - # 33

Robert, do you find yourself falling into little formulas when you structure a story? I know you say it's different every time, but some stories are similar to other stories and kind of call for a similar structure.

And ... do you invent a kind of rough structure for the story before you even go out to do the interviews? I usually do because it give me ideas for ways to open the story or end the story -- ways that suggest certain kinds of tape I'll need. Naturally, the structure changes once the tape is in - but I still find it helpful to think imagine an ideal version of the whole story before I even get the tape.

And finally ... one thing that distinguishes your reporting is that you actually seem to be amusing yourself most of the time. Do you have any thoughts about why so few reporters on tv and radio choose that path?

The Morphing Map

Robert Krulwich - September 22, 2002 - # 36

Structure in story telling is not like structure in architecture. When I decide to do a story what I usually have is:

- a) something neat to think about
- b) somebody to talk to, or something to look at, or somewhere to go that might give the idea focus and excitement..
- c) a way to begin (just a phrase, an idea)
- d) and maybe a way to get out at the end.

That's it. None of it may be true. Or it may be true, but not all that interesting
Or it may be true, but far more complicated and who wants to work that hard...

So I write the "story" in my head. Make it up, literally...the story I hope to tell... beginning, middle and end and then, like Columbus or Henry Hudson I go out to see what's really there. And as the

facts change, so does my outline, my architecture. When certain moments turn out better than expected, when certain people pop out (or fade out), like a baseball coach, I change the roster, rearrange the line up. When I come back to the office the story I left with may be intact or completely unrecognizable.

Like Ira, I need a structure to get out of the office. I can't, like so many reporters do, just leave and say, "I wonder what I'll find. I'll just keep a wide open mind." That strikes me as dangerous...too likely to take a day or two longer than I have, or more money than I can spend, or too scary cause how will I focus? Who will I talk to if I can talk to anybody? Everybody?

That's just me. Other people work fine walking like a Joseph Conrad figure into the big forest. Not me, I always have a map. I am perfectly happy to get lost, or re-write the map, but I can't go in without a plan. So for me structure is a necessary precursor to any story. But it is such a loose, pliable, porous structure, it can warp itself into any shape that seems right.

Choreography For The Air **Ira Glass - September 23, 2002 - # 45**

When I'm structuring something I usually think of the building blocks of the stories as either being plot moments (the actual motion of the story, "So he walks in and sees this dog. The dog looks at him and begins to speak. He steals the dog.") or moments putting forward some idea about what's happened. ("Sometimes, you're better off not encountering a wonder of nature.") And for me, a lot of coming up with a structure amounts to figuring out how to balance the plot moments and the moments of reflection in a graceful way. But those are the basic building blocks for me usually: plot moments and idea moments.

I was wondering if you think of the elements you're juggling in any way that resembles this.

One handy thing about having such a simple structure in mind is that on the staff of TAL, we can communicate easily about structure with each other. When I take a draft of something I've done to Julie or Alex for an edit, they'll often say "you need an idea here, in this part of the story" or "there are too many ideas here in a row, get back to the action."

Obviously there are all sorts of moments besides these two - moments that are just there to be funny, or emotional, or establish someone's character and motivation, but it's kind of helpful for me anyway, to think about it as two main kinds of building blocks.

I wonder if it makes everything on the show sound like everything else. I'd like to believe that if you have simple structural ideas, it clears the stage for you to get all fancy and expressive with other aspects of the storytelling. But maybe I'm kidding myself.

I do know that the writers whose work adapts the most easily to the show, like David Sedaris or Sarah Vowell, write this way anyway anecdotal moments leading to idea moments leading back to anecdotal moments.

Blocks, Triangles And The Mystery of Improvisation **Robert Krulwich - September 23, 2002 - # 48**

I haven't used Ira's block structure: move the narrative, pause and reflect, move again, pause...as a way of creating a meter. Plus, I'm a little surprised to hear him describe his m.o. in those terms; when I listen to This American Life, until now I hadn't been aware --or hadn't noticed--- this action/reflection mode. Now that he's described it, I went and listened to one of my favorite pieces, and indeed, things happened, and then there was a de-brief; the main character paused and got a little distance from the situation, or the narrator asked the main character to explain why something had just happened, or how he felt...So, yeah, that may be what those TAL folks do... or anyway, that's the rough undercoat of what they do. But I'm not sure. I need to listen to a few more stories, and think a little harder...cause even if that's what they SAY they're doing, I think there may be other, better ways to describe what I hear.

For me, my structures are often a conversation between three points...a kind of triangle. I usually have a beginning...or an entry point. I have a key plot turn, or a lesson or some revelation. (And meaning no disrespect to triangles, sometimes I have two revelations, or even three). And I have an end, a place I'm heading to.

What then happens is almost a conversation between the three points. If we start here at A, what's the best way to get to B (the revelation) and once we've hit B how to we get home to C as elegantly as possible. The march from point to point is guided, as I wrote earlier, by my desire to take as many people with me all the way round the triangle...the tactics of seduction I talked about.

This is very mysterious stuff. I sometimes think it's almost dangerous to de-construct too much. I still like what Martin Scorsese said in the New Yorker --- which is where this string of conversation started-- that structure is an improvisation, like arranging flowers in a bowl; at some point, for no apparent reason, one arrangement feels good. So you stop. And you say, "Done". Why this particular configuration of flowers? I donno. Why not some other order? I donno. Why did you stop? Cause it felt complete, in balance. I just listened to a piece Ben Adair (of the Savvy Traveler) did about a traveling circus. It rambled on and on, from town to town, the weather changed, different performers did their thing...it seemed to have no discernable structure and yet...I couldn't stop listening. I have no idea why the scenes were ordered as they were, why some parts were bright and big - toppy and sharp and other parts diffuse, abstract and almost empty; I wonder if Ben could explain why it felt right...but it worked. That time. With those characters.

Duchamprovisation **chelsea merz - September 24, 2002 - # 51**

Krulwich writes: " Each story has its own, very specific, idiosyncratic logic, its own internal music. The tape notices."

Well, he has articulated a process that seems almost visceral--one that appears to transcend logic.

Over the summer the NY times published an article on the realist painter Philip Pearlstein. I couldn't help but transfer Pearlstein's technique to radio production. I often return to this article when I think about radio. But now Krulwich has beautifully described what I once inferred.

Nonetheless the article on Pearlstein is still a good reference. The following excerpts are from the Times article--excerpts that I've been reminded of by this discussion:

"Philip Pearlstein is starting a new picture, another entanglement of toys and nudes, which, if the work goes at its usual deliberate pace, he predicts should take four months of sittings every Tuesday to finish.

The whole image will change drastically, he says, when the words on the side of the toys are painted. They'll catch the eye first. The words jumbo jet on the airplane, he says, "will be almost like the word 'God' in a medieval painting." This is Mr. Pearlstein's first painting with so many words in it. He speaks as if the choice to include them in the picture were not his, that he merely paints whatever happens to be in front of him. "Letting things happen by chance: that's a little Duchampian, I suppose," he says. "Not just copying the words I happen to see, but letting the models help choose the poses, the props."

To watch Mr. Pearlstein is to realize the amount of information to be assimilated if you try to paint everything in front of you, each detail affecting another. "I know it seems a waste of the models' time to pose while I'm painting the pipe or Mickey, but my field of vision changes if they're not there," he explains. "The colors change. A painter is never painting an actual color, only the illusion of it, which has to do with the relationship of colors in the picture. Mickey's shoes look more orange against Alex, the blue of the stage moves closer to purple."

When Bets Are Off

Robert Krulwich - September 24, 2002 - # 53

For Philip Pearlstein there is a reporter-like attitude: Come on world, he says to his models and his artifacts, you do it to me. You, he tells the model, YOU choose a pose. You, he says to the fire truck, You be how you are, beside the model who will affect how you are. I'll just report the scene, he says. And man, is his stuff weird. I mean, ugly, almost. But very interesting to stand in front of. Very disturbing. (Please Note: as mentioned above, that's GOOD.)

For me, the painter I index to is Paul Cezanne. Here's a guy who tried to find a balance. Every step of his way, every time he put a bit of paint on the canvas, he was laying a bet: that what he added would fit what was already there. Every dab, therefore, was dangerous; it could complement, build the feeling he wanted or...it could ruin everything. I imagine him staring for long moments at a half filled canvas, kind of like a Las Vegas gambler playing craps...The gambler rolls dice, Cezanne lays paint; each one is holding his breath. Cezanne paintings often have empty spots. Nobody knows if they are intentional "negative spaces" or whether he had come to a point where he didn't dare make another bet. He just couldn't risk the whole painting on another move. I sometimes feel that way when I compose. I stop when I can't take the next risk.

Too Much Me.....

Nubar - September 24, 2002 - #55

Robert! Are you sure you're not a photographer?

It's surprising to me that, at five years old, positioning yourself just right in the chrome faucet of the bathtub so you could see yourself, that you ended up in radio. I would have become a photographer (which it turns out, I am.)

I'm particularly interested in the discussion around structure that you and Ira have been going back and forth about. As I've gotten older and more seasoned in my field, one of my greatest fears is that I will start imitating myself.... bringing an unconscious structure or formula to a story. At times like these I have to really focus on the subject/story and let it tell me about itself, rather than just making interesting, well composed photographs that people like. I wonder what the difference is for you and Ira here. Do either of you feel this? Do you worry about it? The only solution for me is to just shoot through it. What's the solution for you?

WAY Too Much

Robert Krulwich - September 26, 2002 - #76

This is a big one.

One reason I decided to get out of radio and into tv is there was a guy in New Jersey, a very funny, sharp guy (I've just forgotten his name) who appeared frequently on Morning Edition in the early days; he had a stage name of a Jewish sort, I think he was doing a Catskill's Hotel Comedian riff, and he would talk a lot about reporters on NPR and one day I was in a taxi cab and suddenly I heard myself saying things I was quite sure I had never said.

This man had figured out how I talk, how I pause, how I phrase, how I cut, how I parse the world, and while i thought it flattering on one level, I had Nubar's fear: the fear of being a formula. The fact that this guy could almost convince ME that it was ME talking was positively scary, and I remember thinking, I have to change my ways or change my field of play...A year later, I was doing tv.

I don't know what Ira would say, but I am willing to bet that Ira worries about this as much as anybody. He has created a rhythm of story telling, a narrative style and a field of play (what goes on in private spaces) that when it began was very new and very, very fresh. It attracted a lot of people who heard that rhythm, and that style and if they didn't exactly copy it, they joined it, they did their variant of it. It has fallen to Ira (and his sometime allies Sara Vowell and Alex Kotlowitz) to break his own pattern: to do stories that are harder and more traditionally newsy (Sara's about covering Al Gore, Alex's about the Mayor of Cicero), stories that don't remind you of traditional TAL, stories that say very quietly, "we don't just do THAT, we can also do THIS."

As Nubar points out: that is the only way to break your own rhythm. When it gets predictable, choose a journey that you can't predict. For me, working with Marybeth has been just such a voyage. What she wants to do I never think I can pull off. Her rhythm is different from mine; her eye is different. We struggle mightily sometimes, but when it's done it's either a draw--neither of us got our way--or a kick ass adventure. We never know. As Nubar says, we just get "through it."

Amused Conducting Takes Courage **Viki Merrick - September 25, 2002 - # 58**

boo hiss on logic. and maybe even structure.

So you get out your recorders, cameras, paints, notebooks and some structure and logic in your pocket. maybe a sandwich to go with, and out you go and you do what you do. But you're ENGAGED, stunned, moved, agog, delighted, caught, incurioso, and hopefully not bored, mostly you're ENGAGED. and you like that - it makes you feel good - you gotta share this, get everyone else to get it and feel it too.

You go home and lay around with it, you try this, you add some sun yellow, you get the black to be blacker, you move a sigh, you add a prop. You stand back. Here come the voices. You add red to the yellow, you go blacker still, you draw out the sigh to an uncomfortable length, you move the prop to an odd place for a better payoff. You're having fun, you're tortured, but you're having fun. Where's the logic in that?

The thing about you guys is what Ira referred to as "amusing" yourselves. There's a lot of elements to that - some of it maybe comes from the joy of manipulation, seduction etc, and some of it is personality mixed with a large dose of talent. But Ira mentioned choice. As in, why do so few choose the path of amusing themselves. So, this is a choice?

I've seen this look on Ira's face while he's "conducting" - moving from story to music to a backbeat or offbeat de-brief - all those people that wanna be him? They should. He's amusing himself, right to the marrow. And Robert — you see him on tv telling a really serious story and he slips in these little wedges of something, sort of tastes like joy and you never want to miss one again. So whenever you see him, or hear his name coming out of a speaker, you stop. You maybe burn the onions, but you stop. I end up with that glorious feeling like in high school when I SUDDENLY GOT IT ! and it didn't hurt getting there. Just a sensation of your brain getting warm (oh that's the foreplay Robert described...see? I just got that too. That IS mildly disturbing)

So why WOULDN'T one choose this path, I ask myself? COURAGE ! (c'mon... the Wizard of Oz!) that's what I'm thinking. Or rather that's what I want you to address. Courage means doing something risky that you just HAVE to do, otherwise you know it'll suck any other way. Is it scary to amuse yourself, out there in front of everybody?

Don Roberto Leaves Tub For Tube **Robert Krulwich - September 25, 2002 - # 59**

I love you Viki Merrick. What you just described is the heart of it...the I-can't-top-amusing-myself-and (shhhhhh...I can't believe they're paying me to do this)joy of doing this every day. Some days are horrible, sure. But what you see on Ira's face when he's "conducting" is the real, down and dirty structure of his pieces: taking data from everybody else's lives and constructing small universes for his own private pleasure to share with whoever cares to listen (underscored by a very, very private, desperate, highly competitive absolutely needy desire to have LOTS of people listen, which you don't tell anybody about, ever). Actually, that's not Ira I'm describing. It's somebody else who used to go by the name Don Roberto.

As for scary... One time I got a call from Jay Leno's producer asking if I would appear on his premier show, the first Leno "Tonight" show. I had been on Johnny Carson a couple of times when Leno was the substitute host and we had talked about economic stuff and it had gone pretty well, but we had never developed a rapport. He'd come to the dressing room before we went on, go over things he wanted to do, on we'd go, it'd be over in what seemed like no time, and he would look to the next guest and our eyes would never meet again.

So when the producer called, I couldn't figure why I'd gotten the invitation. I assumed (correctly) that my booking wasn't Jay's idea, it was the executive producers. She wanted to upgrade the Tonight Show list of topics to include more "brainy" issues. But I kind of figured they'd change their minds. So I didn't prepare, I just figured it would go away. It didn't go away...

And to make a long story short, I finally found myself in LA, 45minutes to air, with a rough idea for a skit about executive compensation. Jay said to talk to Billy Crystal, the headline guest, about the skit. (Billy Crystal!!! Just thinking about him made all the saliva in my body roar to my throat in a gulp that would have drowned me on the spot.) I politely knocked on Billy Crystal's door; he was inside rehearsing his homage to Jay, when the door opened, it was clear he was very, very busy. I murmured something. He didn't quite get it. I got shy.

So--- forty minutes later, after Billy had gone on with a brilliant opener, after Shawnese, THE hot singer of that moment and her Shawnese back up group had rocked the house, I was positioned just behind the curtain, and I was standing with a vague outline in my head, no script, no rehearsals, no help, no plan... The stage guys said to move one step forward so they could slip a giant scrim in behind me...Another guy took his position by the curtain to open it up when I got my musical cue (the famous Tonight Show theme) and at that moment i was so overwhelmingly, titanically, humongously terrified, I got spots before my eyes, my head got light and I realized that I was about to faint, or, more horrifyingly, tumble forward through the curtain onto the stage like a corpse.

I have never, ever been so frightened or so close to international humiliation.

I leaned all the way over, so the blood could rush to my head. The stage hands were screaming, "What are YOU DOING? Get OUT OF THE WAY of the scrim ...their voices faded..then came back, the music started, the curtain opened and out I walked... I was terrible. The Washington Post the next day had a sub-head "Big Bird of Economics Bombs" But my family was kind. And I lived through it.

Making The Mundane Wild

Nubar - September 29, 2002 - # 84

I love Viki's response to you earlier about amusing ourselves. But I must add something here. No one I know has a better time amusing himself than filmmaker Errol Morris. However, even his delight in self amusement cannot sustain seven years of working on a film about a guy who used to repair electric chairs in prisons in the U.S. which ended up as a film about self deception, self delusion and the Holocaust. What I'm saying is that there's something soulful about doing this work that binds many of us together. It's soulful to me that you can take something as mundane (to me) as economics and make me sit in my driveway and listen to you talk about it. It's easy to do interesting stories about subjects that are already interesting. But stories about people/ things that are not extraordinary or even mundane are what challenge us, and, in the end, have more legs and endurance in the world. No?

Getting An A Robert Krulwich - October 1, 2002 - # 93

I know this is a prejudice, but I believe it so deeply, it feels like a fact: If you are send to cover a war, an murder, an "Event" at city hall, it's easy to get a gentleman's C; whatever you do, people know why they're listening/ watching. It's news, after all. And for the most part they want to know it. Getting a B isn't that hard either. Getting an A means you have to have learned something nobody else knew or had a thought, a way in, that nobody else thought. A's are rare, but not that rare.

If, however, you meet a kid in high school who has Tourette's syndrome and whistles and jerks and touches his fellow students all day and has to somehow hold it in, or keep it down, day after day after day, and you choose to tell HIS story, you'd better tell it well. Cause if you don't, people won't have any idea why they are listening. The prop of "News Being Made Here" is not available. You just have to make them care. That's what Joe Richman did a few years ago, and from me he got an A. To get an A in the category that Nubar labels "not extraordinary, even mundane" IS a big deal: it does have "more legs and endurance in the world."

Is The Tube Too Tight? Julia Barton - September 25, 2002 - # 63

Robert's above-described Tonight Show nightmare makes me wonder if you feel any major differences working for tv as opposed radio. Other than the differences in pay, pressure, prestige, of course. I actually did work as an intern on a Frontline doc you narrated way-back-when, called Public Lands, Private Profits, about the ghastly heap-leach gold mining process and the damage that piles of cyanide-laden dirt tend to wreak on a place. There were some great visual moments in that film, the best being one in which you (Don Roberto) stand in front of some machinery, interviewing a heap-leach mine manager. You ask how many trucks of dirt laced with microscopic bits of gold it would take to extract the amount of gold in your wedding band, duly held up for the camera. The guy hems and haws but finally guesses (as I recall) ten trucks. Then the camera pulls back to show Robert and this guy dwarfed not just by one of these trucks, but simply the WHEEL of one of these trucks. The wheel, the truck, the wedding ring: it was an awesome juxtaposition of scale that just wouldn't work on radio.

Still, I like working in radio better and still have this sense that tv is often too formulaic. Maybe it's all the money it costs to have a crew, and the amount of planning everything takes. I guess the question is pretty basic: does tv make you feel less free?

The Brittle Zone Robert Krulwich - September 26, 2002 - # 75

Radio and tv are both performance businesses. In both modes, you, you the reporter or you the producer, are going to tell the story... On tv, there is more of you exposed. You have to dress for the occasion, you can be seen, you have the option of using your face, your body to sell or undersell the words you've written; from a performance perspective it's a richer, more exciting, and in a way, freer zone. You are free to use more of yourself...

On the other hand, on tv you are stuck with yourself, with the literal images you've chosen, with the fact (for better or worse) of your appearance; you are on the screen, not in your audience's heads, you are just in front of them, in a little square screen on the kitchen counter or in front of the couch. On tv, you are less free to roam with metaphor, adjectives, insinuations of tone. You are "over there" on the tv. You are not "in there"--in their heads. That, needless to say, is a narrower, less free zone.

This is a very, very interesting question: the difference between tv and radio. I am so struck in radio circles how brittle folks are about tv: sometimes they hate it for its crassness; its flat affect; other times the same people are jealous of it, feel it has more weight in the culture, that it (and the money that comes with it) are the "real deal", and that radio people are forever Chicago-ed, second cited to the Big Appleness of tv.

Meanwhile on the tv side, particularly here in New York, so many people who went to school or who eat dinner or live next door to the tv people are devoted NPR listeners. So many tv people can work furiously to put something on the network in prime time, only discover that all their friends, ALL their friends, missed it. They were listening to NPR.

Sometimes the TV people gaze over at the NPR people with longing.
Sometimes the NPR people gaze over at the TV people with longing.
It's complicated.

There are very famous people here at ABC who notice, when they go on a public radio show, that they get more attention, comment, and start more conversations among folks they know than they can ever get going on network tv. They live to get people talking. Radio has a hunk of the talking, curious people. This border we're about to talk about is a very curious frontier. Changes in technology, changes in habit, the experiences of certain people, Marybeth K., Jay Allison, Scott Simon, Jay Kernis, who've lived on both sides of the border, plus people who don't recognize the border (the very young ones)--they are creating new attitudes and new zones as we sit here.

It's All Great....As Long As You Follow Abba
Ben A[dair] - September 25, 2002 - # 64

Viki wrote: Courage means doing something risky that you just HAVE to do, otherwise you know it'll suck any other way. Is it scary to amuse yourself, out there in front of everybody?

I think the work that really resonates -- the work I really like anyway --isn't the stuff where people are necessarily amusing themselves in front of everybody, it's where people are *being* themselves in front of everybody... I think it's that courage that binds great radio producers, great journalists and documentarians in general. You can see Robert being himself in just about everything he does. Ira too (near as I can tell as I've never met the guy). Scott Carrier for sure (especially in that new old story just posted). Joe is great because he has that rare talent of helping other people get to themselves. He does it wonderfully.

PS: the key to making amazing radio that nobody can turn off is this: put your story *immediately* after 50 minutes of annoying music.

Everyone Has To Ball Their Left Hand Into A Fist, Lower Their Voice As Low As It Will Go, And Speak With Intense Excitement
Jay Allison - September 26, 2002 - # 69

Mary Beth Kirchner is not only a brilliant radio producer, she also has been producing Robert's TV pieces for quite a while. I'd really like to hear more about how that relationship works. Robert is known for his singularity, but there must be some illusion here because TV is generally a team effort. Everyone has to be thinking a little bit like Robert in order to create a sense of authorship. Right? Or does Robert have to think a little like Mary Beth and the cameraman and the anchorman? Actually, I don't know. Would someone please enlighten me?

Brains Melding
Mary Beth Kirchner - September 29, 2002 - # 86

As you can see from the back and forthings with Robert -- there's an endlessly fun and intriguing exchange of ideas when you're on Robert's trajectory... Before we started collaborating four years ago, I always loved Robert's work -- and knew instantly when we first met that we seemed to gravitate to, wince at, and delight in -- a lot of the same things. A good start.

When Robert and I talked about our co-producing for "Nightline," he asked that I generate the ideas for our TV pieces (not the relationship he has with most of his ABC staff producers, who facilitate his ideas). He wanted us to try more "human" stories, which had been more my style. Initially, we looked for ones with a science angle (more his style), trying to find topics to best meld our two approaches. (To name a few, we profiled a husband / wife brain surgeon team -- and an extraordinary class at Harvard Medical School.)

I loved picking the subjects. These were people or locations where I sensed interesting things were likely to happen. And I wanted to go without much of a map. Who knew what might transpire? And why try to decide the structure beforehand? (How dull could brain surgery be, right? But this was FAR more terrifying in television than in radio where thousands of dollars were being spent on camera crews with each passing hour.) On the other hand, Robert preferred to have an outline, which was fine. He worried about the organization, while I kept my eyes peeled for the unexpected (another good meld of our two brains).

Plus, the role of the camera person was key. We've worked mostly with one extraordinary videographer, a gifted storyteller.

Someone asked if I try to get inside Robert's head. I like to think of it as my loaning him the best of mine... Then he goes deep into his own, making uniquely Robert pieces (with his brilliant writing or interview questions or choices in the edit room). When we argue about sequencing or tone of a piece, it's less about my or his "winning" and far more about creating the best product our two (really three, with the cameraman) minds can generate.

In the end, these collaborative pieces with Robert have been some of the best work I've done.

Soul Waffle

Viki Merrick - September 30, 2002 - # 87

Nubar nicely "exposed" something implicit in my observation. (you gotta love a good photographer...they jiggle around those shades of gray and like magic this important hunk of thing like SOUL emerges). I believe when you CHOOSE to be yourself, true to yourself, AND God willing you are full of stuff like soul and curiosity and pigheadedness, you can't help but imbue the story, or the subject in such a way that freezes the audience in their tracks - with joy, horror, ancient sorrow, or good ole curiosity.

I don't want to steal our perfect host's thunder but he has a fine story that illustrates this question of courageous choice. He'll correct me where I'm wrong... So Jay goes to NPR for career talk/ search and there's Robert being his newfound veteran radio journalist self. Jay is young and waffling (is that possible? I mean the waffling.) So Robert says: ok, what would you do if I sent you to the U.S. Treasury to do a story on statistics? (or something equally fascinating.) Jay says: I wouldn't go. OK, what's going on here?

Hard News...

Hal Humphreys - September 30, 2002 - # 88

I love the idea of being assigned a mind-numbing story and trying to find a Douglas Adams way to tell it. But, I fear that sometimes I have the ability to take a very interesting story and find a painfully uninspiring way to tell it.

I think, and please correct me if I am wrong, that daily news reportage can be a great learning tool. I also think (hope) that learning the craft in this way helps in the more creative endeavors.

I told the local news director, with whom I work very closely, that I would be attending the Third Coast International Audio Festival. The news director was happy, "...a chance for you to learn more about the craft of radio." she said. Sounds great so far. But when I said that I was excited about talking to Ben Adair and hearing Ira Glass, she said, "You need to focus on hard news."

Now the question for those I've lost along the way: Is focusing on hard news a reasonable way to learn the craft? (my guess is, yes) But if that becomes the focus of my daily life, will I loose the urge to produce long format documentaries and die an obscure local news reporter in a secondary market telling statistic filled, but entertaining, 4:45 min. stories for insertion into morning edition?

...Leads To Drink

Julia Barton - October 1, 2002 - # 90

When people say "hard news," I always think they mean the same news that everyone else is doing, which is neither hard nor especially new. But I'm cynical and in Russia, so take my grousing with a grain of vodka.

Set 'Em Up, Joe
Hal Humphreys - October 1, 2002 - #92

Correct me if I am wrong, o wise ones, but isn't the story that gets put on the back burner - the one that's not an emergency or breaking news - often the more important story? Just trying to understand. Julia, I have taken your advice and am going to go on a vodka bender for the night. Maybe tomorrow, I'll have a news story to tell.

Okay, Some Me
Robert Krulwich - October 1, 2002 - #95

As I write, Hal has been drinking for three hours and twenty minutes (assuming he's in my time zone), so we can talk by ourselves. It's odd, but a world famous photographer and a radio newbie have both asked the same question: don't less important subjects often make more important stories. I'd say yes.

But if Hal were in the room and standing up, I'd say, do the stories you are given, just do them in a way, a subtle way if you must, but a way you that makes them, just a bit yours. Yours because of the way you wrote, the cuts you made, the angle you chose, the rhythm you created, anything that feels good to you that you can get away with, so that later that night you can hear them and pat yourself on the head and say... "That's me on the radio." "That's me" meaning, (or at least hoping) that no one else could do that little thing you did (with the voice, the angle, the rhythm), but you.

4:35 spots on Morning Edition, by the way, are Dostoyefskian lengths if you have to do the Peter Jennings World News Tonight show. On that one, 2:15 seconds is a Big Story.

Soulful Sight
Viki Merrick - October 2, 2002 - #96

Now I get to answer my own question, sort of. and with a certain safety net, given your response to Hal. I wouldn't be surprised if you asked Jay something like that - then HE would honestly ask himself the question. Jay isn't a reporter. You are - you work crazy stuff INSIDE a prescribed and often restricted frame.

Ever write a sonnet? I bet you'd be good at it. Lots of rules to bend and play with. It's what you do on television. Jay does Odes. doesn't he? (geeze I hope I don't get fired for this) "written in varied or irregular meter" - equally challenging to pull off. But they can both ELEVATE their subject unforgettably if they're done with all the ingredients we've been talking about - courage of being oneself, and using one's soulful sight "*to have learned something nobody else knew or had a thought, a way in, that nobody else thought*".

If you paint, or take pictures or tell stories - it's not the format per se, it's how you find your "voice" and use it best. that's when you're having a good time.

For The Good Of All
Jay Allison - October 2, 2002 - # 97

Is this a hypothetical question, or did I really say that to Jay?

Robert, yes, we did have a conversation like that. It was in 1970something and Jim Russell suggested I go to your "office" to ask you about being a reporter because you were head of something at the time. Washington desk? I forget. I was sneaking into NPR at night, coming from the theatre where I had run out of life experience upon which to draw. Keith Talbot (I want to find him and get him to be a Transom Guest someday; where *is* he?) loaned me one of NPR's Sony 800-B portable reel-to-reels with which I'd made a few oddball pieces, which is probably why they sent me to you.

You asked, reasonably, how I would handle an assignment like reporting on inflation or goings on at the Treasury. The idea seemed impossible to me. So, I said I wouldn't (couldn't) do it. This was partly out of fear and ignorance, and also a sensible reluctance to play on Krulwich Turf where mind-numbing subjects are overmatched by huge charm, and finally because I had no interest or connection to the story, so I knew whatever I did would suck. This, admittedly, is a somewhat spoiled artist's view of a working life. I said I came from the theatre.

I suppose I remember this moment because it was approximately when I realized I'd better remain an independent producer, for the good of all.

Understanding The Frame
Jay Allison - October 2, 2002 - # 98

It so happens that a certain Photojournalist has been visiting me the last couple days in order to go fishing and eat fish. I am very interested in learning to take better pictures, or, really to see more meaning with a camera, and the PJ is helping me, mostly by email. Among the interesting things he has said are:

"You're walking down the street and suddenly you're struck by something. You're not sure what it is. Or maybe you are. But the problem at that moment is how to translate that into a two dimensional image....how to take a photograph of that. When I'm struck by something, I stop right there....I don't move, even if I'm uncertain as to the actual subject. I shoot from there first. Even if it makes no sense."

"My first reaction to my work....when I'm looking at my contact sheets...is depression. All I see is what they are not! I'm used to it now, so it's not fair to call it depression. After this phase, I actually see what they are."

So.... last night, Nubar looked at some of my pictures and then he asked for some electrician's tape and scissors. He cut a little square of tape and placed it directly over the center of my viewfinder.

"You're not paying attention to the edges. Now you won't be able to see the middle. Shoot five or six rolls like this and you will start to understand the frame."

If you can't derive an instructive sermon on narrative from that, it's time to take a break from Church. These embedded lessons about story are one reason I want to learn to take better pictures.

When No Means “No, Not Me” nubar - October 2, 2002 - # 99

When I read that Jay said he wouldn't go to the Treasury, I took away a different meaning. In my world of photojournalism, what I say "no" to defines what I do as much, or sometimes more than what I agree to shoot on assignment. So, I read this event with Jay in this context...that it wasn't for him...that it was not the kind of subject that reflected what he was interested in.

When a magazine like Business Week wants to do a story like A Day in the Life of Six Fund Managers, they'll call someone like me who does this kind fly on the wall photojournalism. However. It pisses off photographers who work for them all the time shooting portraits of men in suits, hoping and expecting that when a plum assignment like this comes along, they will get it. But that's not how it works. We are what we do. And that's based often based on what's published.

Bright Eyes, Bad Message Robert Krulwich - October 3, 2002 - # 101

If that really was me in my "office" (As I recall, Jim Russell couldn't give me an office; he put my desk in a corridor; so I was parked where everybody had to slip around me...If I said that to Jay, or maybe I should say, WHEN I said that to Jay, I was stupid. It is the job of an editor to turn people on, not off.

If somebody came to me today and said here's what I want to do, can I do it? Even if I thought they weren't a good fit for my newsroom I would at least try to get under their skin a little, to figure out what got them to walk into the room in the first place, and I would tell them, "Neat, if that's what you want to do, here's what it would take to do it here." And then I would launch into an itinerary that might not sound too glamorous ("first the Treasury Department...") but it would end up where the reporter wanted to end. It would honor his/her dream. Even if I knew the dream was close to impossible, I would still chart out the voyage. I wouldn't want to tell anyone with bright eyes, "No. Not here. Not ever." It's bad for the one with bright eyes. And it's bad for the organization that needs bright eyes.

And if that's what I did to Jay, jeeeshhh...

A Useful Challenge Jay Allison - October 3, 2002 - # 102

This ancient parable must be amended in its meaning because there was no "asinine" behavior in this story, or in my memory. I was **challenged** by Robert's question, and it was a good one. He wasn't forcing me into a mold, he was figuring out what I might be interested in doing. "What *would* you do if I asked you to go to the Treasury." My internal response was, "Urghh." The idea frightened me, because, my twenty-something bright eyes notwithstanding, I had no chops.

When I answered, "I wouldn't go," I wasn't being brave or true to my bright eyes, I was being chicken.... and maybe inadvertently honest about my interests and abilities.

Afterward, I had to think about the chicken-ness. And my interests and abilities. And what to **do** about it all. It certainly didn't discourage me from working in public radio. It just gave me a clearer sense of what I might be good for. **This** was the useful part of the meeting with Robert in His Corridor, and, really, what we're working on here at Transom.

My most productive question to producers/artists/journalists approaching us here is: "What's stopping you?" It requires a useful answer. Robert's question to me was like that.

Antique Krulwich

Archived NPR stories courtesy of the Museum of Radio & Television:

http://www.transom.org/guests/specialguests/robertkrulwich_audio.html

OPEC: Losin' Your Hold Over Me - 1981

Ladies Who Terrorize Grocers - 1981

Dr. Oliver Sacks: Jimmy - 1981

Dr. Oliver Sacks: Donna - 1984

Ancient Rents- 1983

Letting Go

Robert Krulwich - October 4, 2002 - #106

Jay asked me to annotate these clips.

As I recall, "**You're Losing Your Hold Over Me**" comes from the early 1980's, about 8 or 9 years after the first big oil shock of 1973. It was part of a package we did describing how the USA was in the midst of a profound retro-engineering effort that had significantly changed our patterns of energy use... To introduce the package, we decided to begin with a radio musical.

At the time, somebody was trying to create another Woodstock Reunion, a 24 hour continuous rock concert of peace, love, etc., so I decided to do the same thing. Noah Adams found the instrumental that becomes the melodic line of **Your Losing Your Hold Over Me**. I have no idea where he got it--he sent it on the land line from D.C. to NYC. Manoli, our engineer, gave me the music. I wrote the lyrics one morning in Riverside Park. I sent them to Jo Miglino, NPR's top Florida correspondent at the time who had a wonderful voice. We did the duet, Jo and I, long distance, with telephones in our ears (as I recall; this may be fantasy) and Manoli and I designed the crowd scenes, the applause, the reverb and all that.

Today, I'm guessing, we would be stopped by the Legal Department, by the Politically Correct police who would allow an NPR correspondent to make fun of people with silly accents, and we'd be lambasted by a hunk of the audience who would object to the tone, the style, and probably, the joy. But say what you will about a piece like this, in listening to it just now, what I most like about it is that three letter word: joy. Sometimes it's just fun to let go completely--- All these years (20 plus!) later, I still feel the deep, deep pleasure of singing my heart out with Jo. Sigh.

A Celebration of Evil

Robert Krulwich - October 4, 2002 - # 108

Ladies Who Terrorize Grocers

Gladys Tardiban called me at the office to tell me her tale: how she and "The Bronx Ladies" were pouncing on helpless grocers all over New York. She knew she was bad. She liked being bad. I asked her (and a friend) to come in, talk; Poor Bob the grocer I called on the phone. The whole thing fell together very quickly. This is a celebration of evil.

Bedtime Stories

Robert Krulwich - October 4, 2002 - # 109

Oliver Sacks

I haven't heard these yet, but here's what I remember. In the early 80's...81, 84, I don't recall, a friend of mine, Lawrence Weschler, told me that there was this guy, a doctor, who was laid up at Montifiore Hospital in the Bronx and was an extraordinary story teller, who's case studies of patients with neurological disorders had appeared in the New York Review of Books. Weschler showed me a manuscript. I was amazed. So for several weeks, in the late afternoons, I would visit Oliver -- who was suffering some difficulty with his leg -- and sit with my tape recorder at this bedside. We talked for hours. It was like he was telling me bedtime stories. This is the result.

The Secret's In The Softener

Jim Russell - October 4, 2002 - # 110

Mostly, I lurk here and enjoy reading other people's thoughts -- I have especially enjoyed being reminded of how brilliant Robert is. I remember hiring him at NPR. "You can't do that," my boss, some faceless VP of Pomposity said, "he is clearly a Communist, having come from Pacifica and Rolling Stone!"

One comment above, by Hal Humphreys peaked my dander. He quoted his news director saying, "You need to focus on hard news." I have heard that my whole life, when the evidence is ample that the stories people remember - the stories that get to and stay with listeners - are the human stories, not the hard news. In fact, I remember arguing to the same self-important NPR Poobah's years ago that we spent all of our money hiring "public affairs" reporters and none on "human affairs" reporters. It was a made-up term, but it was good enough to create a spot for Scott Simon! CBS's Charles Kuralt spent his whole life covering little human stories, and people still remember them, long after they've forgotten the hard news.

The real point is that hard news and soft news are sort of meaningless terms anyway. It isn't the subject that matters, but rather the TREATMENT, which is hard or soft. And, I have long argued that a soft or human treatment of a major news story -- has the potential to speak to listeners more directly, on a more significant level, than all of the news analysis ever will.

NPR has made a name for itself in hard news and analysis. But, what makes our medium really special and unique is how we humanize stories. In the end, NPR is a combination of the two -- but the soft treatment gets short shrift these days, too often gets overwhelmed by the news and

analysis. A former news director at NPR made this clear when he said he wanted established journalists on his staff, and then went on to say that HE would never have hired a feature reporter like Susan Stenberg. I rest my case.

Scratching At That Itch **Robert Krulwich - October 9, 2002 - #118**

I got a note today from Jay Kernis, king of the world, who's thinking out loud again about an NPR TV show. Not that he has the money or anything, but that itch, that tv itch won't go away. So I'm wondering: Here we have what is arguably the best news organization in the English speaking world (yes, as Jim Russell points out, it could make a few more stabs at joy and despair; it could be a little more foolish, a little more unexpected, a little less like itself--yes, yes...but let's admit: it is very, very good. It dares to be complicated. It talks about the world beyond America. It has Alex and Nina and Scott and Robert and a host of others), so why does it keep thinking about tv?

Should NPR have, even a little bit, a tv presence? The obvious argument in favor is that a lot of people watch tv who haven't yet discovered public radio, so if NPR does a little tv well, it could bring a lot more people over to radio -- if, IF, tv audiences are seducible.

The obvious argument against is: you've got a good thing going, why risk ruining it? The two cultures don't mix too well; TV is a hungry, demanding monster medium and this will end up being a Medusa and Snail story.

The Corners Of The World **Ben A. - October 11, 2002 - #131**

I think that part of the problem with NPR doing a tv show is that they take a similar approach to TV as they do to radio -- they want to be distinguished as the "source of record" so they feel like they need to cover the same subjects that their daily news magazines cover -- the going-ons in Washington, or New York -- and you end up with a re-hashing of ATC or ME only longer and boring...

Really, when I think about it, the perfect place for a limited-run NPR series is on HBO. Think about arming Joe Richman, Jay Allison, all the prison kids WNYC found -- give them all MiniDVs and document the world that way. TV doesn't have to be a five-person crew all the time. You can do wonderful stuff by yourself with a tiny, tiny digital camera. Make it real with no music (ala GMA or 20/20), narration only when necessary. Robert, you can host and show us the corners of the world that public radio producers seem fixated on. Do it in a way that isn't "radio with pictures" but something seldom seen on TV: real life, as it happens. (Of course, highly edited and produced.) Now THAT would be interesting.

Peering In **Howard - October 11, 2002 - #132**

I am neither a producer, writer nor journalist... I visit this site and others to get an idea for what this is all about. What this medium, radio, is all about and how the people who make it work, make me want to tune in on Saturday at 10 a.m. or let my soup boil over because I MUST listen to what's being said, do what they do. It fascinates me.

For those of you who have been involved in this for decades, does it still live and breath and feel new for you? Has the journey been (continues to be) fulfilling.

Never Better

Robert Krulwich - October 12, 2002 - # 135

Howard asks, “Does it still feel new for you?” Well, in my case, I've been out of it for twenty years, doing tv instead, so I have switched from a do-er to a listener, and as a listener, I would have to say right now, at this moment, if you draw a circle around Public Radio, (NPR, PRI, the community stations, the local stations, the whole thing) this is the best it has ever been....

Was it like this 25 years ago? No it was not. Public radio (in sharp, almost shocking contrast to public television) has budded and flowered and is now as beautiful and tasty as it has ever been. The only question I have...and this is the whole point of Transom...is will it continue to surprise a new set of people... Can we keep Ben Adair, and Mariane McQuen and Paul McCarthy to name [three] who are beginning their careers? That's why we're here, on this site: to nurture the new and keep the blood flowing. But Howard, if you're wondering whether you missed out on a Big Moment that happened 20 years ago...you didn't. THIS is the moment.

So How Come The Room's So Empty?

Howard - October 13, 2002 - # 142

In regard to the first question “...will it continue to surprise a new set of people...” are you talking about listeners or contributors (writers, producers, etc.)? If you are talking about listeners I feel I have to ask, well, why wouldn't it? It seems to me that the issue is not so much the surprise as it is the new set of people. I think that there is plenty on public radio today to excite and surprise listeners but the question is, how do you draw them in or, better yet, why aren't they already drawn in like they are with tv or say, Howard Stern?

Is that a foolish/naïve question? Is it the advertising, the marketing of the other medium/shows or lack thereof for public broadcasting? Is it our attention spans? Is it the fact that people don't have to listen to pledge drives on tv or commercial radio? Is it the effect on our brain, the stimulation of the visual as opposed to auditory? Why aren't more people (Americans) drawn to public radio?

And in regard to your second question “Can we keep Ben Adair...who are at the beginning of their careers” I ask, why not? Do you feel that it's likely that these writers, journalists and producers would want to ply their trade elsewhere? If so, why? Is it difficult to keep people in the radio business?

Tipping In The Wind

Robert Krulwich - October 16, 2002 - # 145

The problem, Howard, is pretty simple. First, it's real hard to find a job, a wedge that gets you a toehold in this world. When public radio was younger and growing there were seats all over the house. Now most of them are full. So if you've just finished college and you're looking for a place to go, you have to search and search and volunteer and do internships and stand in line. Not that

you don't have to do that in commercial tv and radio and newspapering, it's just, considering that the pay is low, a bit surprising that there's so little room in the inn.

Second, when I started in this business, the people who hired me were more or less my age... in my first three jobs I was surrounded by people who'd watched the same tv, listened to the same music, lived through the same war, the same civil rights movement, etc. etc, as me. I didn't begin working for adults (that is, the generation above me) until I was in my mid thirties. The folks entering public radio today haven't reached a critical mass, haven't gathered in one place, haven't networked, haven't had the space, the money or the courage just yet to create their own sound, the sound that's unique, that speaks (in many different flavors, of course) to them.

I think that right now something important is happening. I think my friends Davia Nelson and JJ Yore and Ira Glass and certainly Jay Allison feel it too. All of us have been looking around, trying to help the folks behind us make the tentative web of connections that will create new shows and new jobs and new voices for the next 25 years of public radio... And in the last year, since the last Chicago meeting, I have begun to hear this buzz...So and so had just met so and so. The guy in Brooklyn is now regularly e-mailing the guy in Pasadena...I could be wrong, or premature, but as Malcolm Gladwell has so brilliantly described moments like these, it takes a certain momentum and sometimes, whoooshhh.... you get a Tipping Point, and then things really begin to hum.

I feel a momentum building. I'm too much of a veteran to feel the wind at MY back, but I'm a good enough reporter to hear the wind kicking up, to know that it's time to start watching closely so I don't miss the moment when it happens.

Stylin'

Tommy Trussell - October 12, 2002 - #137

I enjoyed listening to the Krulwich pieces, and my reaction was that I found them very interesting, but having a totally different sound than plays today. To my ears they are all much more intricately edited than most of the pieces that play today...The up-side is they are very intelligent and demonstrate a high level of craft. ... The down-side is they require you to be listening very actively lest you lose the thread. I'm hearing a ATC report in the background right now, and the reporter is speaking and relaying ideas glacially compared to these.

As I listened to each one, I thought that they might be stylistically out of place on Morning Edition or All Things Considered nowadays. Not that this is bad -- pieces from other folks' golden ages might not fit, either.

Style is very important, obviously -- in fact I read somewhere that many of the big shows want you to send them the raw recordings and transcripts so they can cut and mix to fit. Did these pieces fit in to the shows during the 1970s just like men wearing wide ties, big sideburns and wide lapels? Or were they unusual even then?

Squeezin'

Robert Krulwich - October 12, 2002 - #138

Tommy asks about fitting in back then. Did I? No. Not really. But I was welcomed. And that's all you can ask. You do what you do and you hope to get a voice at the table; if your voice doesn't

sound much like the other voices, if it's a little too intricate, or too sassy, or too dark, or too something, but not overly so, AND if they all squeeze over and give you a seat anyway, knowing that you don't sound like them, that's the best. It's generous, even. And NPR back then wasn't better than it is today, but it may have been a little more generous.

Dreamin'

Stasia DeMarco - October 15, 2002 - # 144

If NPR offered a world radio service, would it then need to expand and include international affiliates? Could NPR lose CPB funding or even get CPB funding for establishing an overseas presence? NPR TV could possibly be cheaper than an NPR world radio service.

My next question is how would NPR TV differ from PBS stations? Would it be formatted like a 24-hour cable news channel?

NPR needs to grab the younger audience (18-35). I can honestly say as a journalist and as a current college instructor of Intro to Mass Comm, college age kids are not that down with radio--as a medium. They get their news from TV and more often than not its MTV. Could NPR stick to its mission and "make" attention-grabbing TV without bankrupting the radio network? If so, it would certainly be worth it. The new young viewers would be the ones to take the information they get from NPR and hopefully become better citizens for it.

And, sometimes one needs to infiltrate the system that one hates in order to make a difference. In that ideal world where money grows on trees, NPR could create a world radio service and produce some kick-ass TV and not have "caved" to the Machine. But reality persists.

Hooking The Young

Steve Schultze - October 16, 2002 - # 146

As a member of the "younger" demographic (I'm 22), I agree with much of what Stasia said. She's absolutely correct that many people my age aren't drawn to radio. However, there are a few shows that, in my anecdotal experience, bring in younger listeners. Of course, the big one is TAL, which hooked me on public radio. It hooked some of my friends, too.

In my opinion, NPR needs more of these "gateway shows" or "gateway pieces" that challenge what has become the established NPR feel. As a kid, I would hear the ATC theme music in my parents' minivan and sing along, "bo-ring, bo-ring, bo-ring, bo-ring." I've learned to reconsider, but only because I'm surprised by different voices. These voices are sometimes on flagship shows but usually elsewhere. When offered the choice between NPRVoice (TOTN/ ATC/ etc at their most stodgy) and flipping to the commercial music station to hear the latest Jay-Z remix, I often choose the latter. TAL, on the other hand, has played Jay-Z between segments.

I don't know how "hip" radio would translate into TV. For sure, I can't stand watching another episode of MTV Cribs. But, part of what makes me likely to listen to good radio is that the act of listening is less intentional... I can listen to it in the car or while I'm doing something else. I also have less entrenched mores about what I'm supposed to be listening to. For me, it's an easier gateway, and at the same time it gets inside my head more than a casual TV flipping.

Where on TV could we make room for the voices like the ones that appeal to me on the radio? There was a show on Fox last season, which was cancelled after half a season, called "Undeclared." It was created by Judd Apatow, the co-creator of "Freaks & Geeks", which was similarly cancelled. ... They captured the essence of being in high school or college in a way that was fairly realistic and often evoked empathy.

When it comes down to it, I don't know exactly what to do about TV. TV depresses me for the most part and I've started to avoid it.

A Lattice That Could Burn
Jay Allison - October 16, 2002 - # 147

I certainly feel this momentum Robert is talking about. Dave Eggers describes it as a kind of lattice. The Web is its friend. Radio is its ally too in the spreading of consciousness, partly because it conveys TONE along with the information -- a wink, a handshake, a sensibility, humanity. Both media, unlike television, have lots of cracks in the walls where actual people, citizens, can still squeeze through, and speak. Television, because of the associated cash, is a tighter scene and even though people like Robert have found ways to exist within it, wouldn't you say, Robert, you sometimes feel like an outlander in camp?

Steve Schultze's posting describes the terrain well, the vacuum that TV is creating. Where there is a vacuum, there is opportunity.

The Web -- and the way it brings together radio, writers, small publishers, artists and performers, independent film and video makers, social activists, musicians, documentary photographers, and others -- allows us to recognize each other, and by "us" I mean anyone dissatisfied by the mostly miserable way we are served and addressed by corporate media. Our energy is derived from the un-burnt gases left over from that exchange. And there is more and more fuel all the time.

The Right Track
evso - October 16, 2002 - # 148

I think what should happen is that more shows along the lines of "TAL" should start up (aimed towards 20-30 year olds). I think NPR is on the right track... it might take you a while, but as long as you are aware that this is an issue, you can work on it. I just don't see how television will help you get there. Who knows? Prove me wrong! Let's do something to increase the number of listeners to NPR.

What's The Point?
Anaheed Alani - October 16, 2002 - # 149

Why do "we" want to increase the number of NPR listeners? I mean, besides making more money for the public radio stations, what's that going to accomplish?

Size Does Too Matter

william warner - October 16, 2002 - # 150

Size Matters. Why wouldn't anyone, producer or consumer, want to expose a larger audience to better, more useful, more engaging, more credible news? It's a basic citizenship issue, and it also gets at some of the mysterious underlying appeal of broadcasting. Isn't the most important thing about listening to the radio that other people are hearing what you're hearing, at the same time?

I suppose what you really mean is that the quality of the broadcast depends on the quality of its audience. That may be partly true, but I don't think large audiences demand low quality, either. Besides, stories have to be guided by some semblance of professional standards and integrity regardless of the size of their audience. NPR proves there's an audience for great journalism.

I'd hate to see NPR ruined in an attempt to reach a larger audience....In the end, news and stories aren't about technology or delivery systems, and the ingredient that makes NPR worth contributing to isn't its machinery but its people.

No, First You Get Them All To Ball Their Left Hand Into A Fist....

hal - October 16, 2002 - # 151

The question comes back to: at what point do you get to say "enough of this hard news attitude. Let's have some fun with this stuff." ... How do you get the local news department to stop being NPR imitators and get off their butts and produce something really brilliant, local and full of flavor. Or do you just produce as many stories for them as you can and then try and break into OAG, TAL, etc with something completely different??

What Drives The Quest

Ben A. - October 17, 2002 - # 156

I think the quest for more audience is driven in three ways. 1) At the station level -- the station directors want more audience so they can raise their underwriting rates and sell more ad time, and sometimes get more subscribers; 2) At the national programming level -- shows want more stations so they can raise their underwriting rates and sell more ad time, and sometimes raise their carriage fees; 3) At the individual producer level -- why share what you're hearing with 500,000 people when you could reach 4.7 million?

But, that said, if that's the dynamic, and the stations and the networks are feeling all this financial pressure, why not encourage ventures that will relieve it? Like NPR on TV. Like Minnesota Public Radio did with their ancillariesalog business. Like Ira did with the movie deal. Of course, the assumption is that NPR-TV actually makes some money. And the risk is that everyone just gets greedy.

Hal, I think you hit something really important. I think a lot of reporters who work really, really hard at breaking onto the NPR newsmagazines find that their creative muscles totally atrophy. I think the non-newsmagazine shows really suffer because of it.

Real Money All Around Jackson - October 17, 2002 - # 158

The problem with TV is that TV involves real money -- and involves real money all around. A TV set is more expensive than a radio. Instead of one engineer, you need three -- along with a wardrobe master, a set design specialist, a camera operator and God knows whom else. Oh, yeah. Make-up.

Now, of course, with digital video and all that, the costs will come down to some degree. But not enough to bring it to the level of radio. Which means, for non-profit work, doing TV is almost like running a political campaign, spending more time trying to find money than actually getting any work done. And in the for-profit realm, it's not only finding a sponsor, but finding a sponsor who won't demand product placement and editorial consideration because they're throwing all these bucks at you. Let PBS do whatever it is it will do, just as long as it doesn't sap all CPB money in its struggle against the inevitable.

The Mature Stage: Staying Alive Robert Krulwich - October 18, 2002 - # 160

There's going to be a meeting in Washington next week to talk about an NPR tv show. From the discussion going on here, I can imagine what issues will be hanging in the air:

Number One: money. NPR hasn't got any, or hardly any, and as Jackson points out, tv is indeed more expensive than radio. The cost curve is coming down, but still.... So NPR will either have to raise money, form a joint venture with a tv outfit (with the consequent culture clash, cause NPR has a very proud, even prickly culture), or take some of its radio money and spend it on television.

Number Two: What are the risks to the radio operation if NPR has to raise money, form a joint venture or spend its own precious cash?
Or, put the other way round: What are the benefits to NPR of having a tv wing?

This will be next week's big question. When an institution grows, matures and gets successful (and NPR has done all three), inevitably a certain routine kicks in. A successful place gets used to its success. It knows why it's good; its audience knows why it's good; its newer employees hear that goodness and want to help make more -- and so a circular logic kicks in and almost without realizing it, everybody pitches in and does more and more of the same thing, the same kind of Good. Other versions of good, different products, different flavors, different meters, get less attention, or get ignored, or worse, get rejected because, as people start to tell each other, that's not "what we do".

This cycle happens everywhere. It happened at CBS. It happened at General Motors. It's happening at NPR. Public radio at large is still experimenting. Jim Russell is trying a weekend streaming radio service. More stations are growing local talent. From what I'm told by folks in different places, public radio is has little pockets where new, strange things happen; Ruth's station in Santa Monica, WBEZ, more recently WNYC...but NPR itself is at the "mature" stage. It found its voice. It likes its voice. But everyone knows that its dangerous to get fat and happy. (Well, 'fat' may be overstating it. Let's just call NPR 'happy'.)

And so, what a tv venture offers one obvious benefit. If it's done right, it could be new, with new rules. The tv venture could be a zone where NPR people could play, reinvent, re-flavor their way of seeing and hearing; it could be a place where new people come, new talent and new audience; it could be...and this is important in the life of an organization, a new challenge. Or not. Cause there is a risk.

Which brings me to question Three: is there something about tv that always swallows radio? Is it the money? The swagger that comes with the money? Is tv going to change? Will 2010 tv be like 1970's tv? Or, as the cameras get smaller, the crews smaller (as in one reporter carrying his/her camera, gear and everything in an overcoat pocket), will tv and radio find a comfortable zone. Or put more baldly: can NPR do a tv venture and come out alive? come out better?

Upside Carl Kasell's Face And Such **Tommy Trussell - October 18, 2002 - # 161**

NPR could draw upon its existing news content and translate it to TV. A station (maybe especially small-market PBS stations) might run some portion of the top-of-the-hour news feed, and rather than showing Carl Kasell's face the audio could run along with some sort of informational display. (Or groovy moire patterns.) CNN redid their Headline News to add infojunk all over the screen, essentially making the talking-head anchors smaller. NPR could start from the other extreme.

I can imagine other shows, too. To many TV viewers, decent audio is wasted because it comes out of a tiny speaker glued to the inside of a plastic box. But surely more engaging audio content could be presented on the tube just as some folks are doing now on the Internet.

The market for shows with "enhanced audio" might even, ironically, be accelerated by the conversion to digital TV. My parents said they bought their first color TV specifically to watch a particular show. NPR shows might include a marketing catch phrase (like "In Color" on 1960s TV shows) that lets the audience know they could be perceiving more on a new set with decent sound.

Fade To Black **Jay Allison - October 18, 2002 - # 162**

I have done radio-style pieces for Nightline -- meaning working as a solo-crew: cameraman, soundman, producer, writer, reporter... just like radio -- and have enjoyed the work enormously. The Nightline team is an inspiring bunch and the sensibility match with NPR is very close. I'd like to do more of that work, but it's all-consuming. Filling *all* roles in television production leaves no room for anything else, and I like doing ten projects at once. And I missed radio too much.

My main feeling when making TV pieces, as probably stated here before, is the steady desire to tell the videotape editor, "just fade to black here, we don't need a picture, just listen to the story." Maybe NPR could do a TV show called *Fade to Black*.

More Antique Krulwich

Archived NPR stories courtesy of the Museum of Radio & Television:

http://www.transom.org/guests/specialguests/robertkrulwich_audio.html

Krasilovsky

NPR; 1981

Designer Blue Jeans

NPR; 1981

Robert's Report From The Tippy-Top Down Robert Krulwich - October 26, 2002 - # 173

Well the meeting took place, but the question was NOT "Should NPR have a TV show?" It's my suspicion that if a vote were taken today at NPR, a strong majority... two thirds, maybe more...would vote against a TV product. The feeling (and I was told this any number of times outside the meeting) was that the place is stretched already, is shy of money, the economy is not on the rise, and anyway TV eats radio for dinner, so...why do this?

Apparently the folks who run NPR--the ones at the tippy top--are nonetheless interested in some kind of tv project, especially if it can bring in revenue. If, instead of PBS, NPR turned to ABC Nightline (Nightline was at the meeting) and got some network revenue, then maybe the thing could be affordable. Also, the guy who runs NPR News, Jay Kernis, was at CBS TV for years, so he is not at all afraid of tv, likes it even. So instead of debating WHETHER to do TV, the meeting pretended that television was a live, desirable option and so the 20 odd people in the room were asked a different question: "If NPR had a TV show, what would it be like?"

So that's what we talked about. Since anything was possible, the discussion was wide ranging. In the end, some of the best reporters anywhere -- Scott Simon, Alex Chadwick, Deb Amos, Jay Allison, Joe Richman, , and many others -- all described stories they'd want to do for a tv show. The stories sounded great; it was agreed that being topical was good, being funny was good; Jay Kernis was smiling and then everybody stood up, shook hands and left the room.

Was it fun? Yes.

Was it useful? Maybe.

Was it a critical breakthrough, leading NPR into a brave new world?

No. Not yet. Maybe not ever. But that is what happened.

Um, Excuse Me, But....

Tess - October 27, 2002 - # 174

One point that has been alluded to several times in this discussion is the excellence of NPR news. I keep waiting for someone to say it, and no one has, so with trepidation I'll ask, rhetorically: what's so great about NPR news? ...In general, anything more than superficial coverage of public policy issues is nonexistent on NPR. Interviews with notables are flaccid: questions are predictable, weasel answers and non-answers are received respectfully, and absolutely nothing is learned by

listeners. Just as a first step, how about if reporters start politely repeating questions until they are answered? This would cost no money and might eventually get useful information before the public. At least it would stop NPR from providing just another platform for spin.

Cokie Roberts' model for Washington coverage, i.e., the story is the inside-the-beltway machinations rather than something with actual implications for us, has taken over. The real consequences of a war with Iraq, or the crashing & burning economy, or anything else, are covered primarily in terms of the politics & the polling. Will Hillary be able to stand up to the pro-Israel vote and oppose the Iraq war? What do the people in Milwaukee think about the stock market? These are not the primary things I need to know in order to be an informed citizen! And isn't keeping the citizenry informed what a nationally funded public radio network should be doing, at least some of the time?

Foreign coverage is even worse. We hardly hear about other countries unless we are about to invade them. And we virtually never get any impression of what citizens and foreign governments think about the US. This makes it possible for us to be completely shocked when we are confronted with the hatred of Al Qaeda, and it also enables us to bomb distant countries, which we know nothing about, without the same kind of misgivings we would have if we were going to bomb, say, Canada. NPR does no service to US citizens when it leaves us so ignorant about everywhere else. When I travel in the UK, I am amazed at the amount and depth of BBC coverage of the rest of the globe. Whether it be a travelogue on Tuva or the politics of Nigeria, the BBC is there.

Would taking NPR to TV somehow re-energize NPR radio, inspire it to go beyond the spokespeople reading scripts, and instead convey information even if it is complex and hard to get? If so, then they should go for it. This doesn't seem real likely to me, but I would be willing to try anything that might lead to some substance.

The best news programs I have heard in recent years have been on TAL - using the Al Gore campaign to show how the media bias shapes the news; shows on deportation, and on prisons, and on drug sentencing laws. I sure would like to hear more stuff like that, but it isn't happening at NPR. It might be if Mr. K were still working there, and if he (and others) were encouraging the Bright Eyes to report what they really see and wonder about, and not what the NPR staff has gotten into the habit of thinking is news.

Sometimes You Just Can't Buy American

Phil Easley - October 27, 2002 - #175

I happen to be at a station that is too tiny to afford anything from NPR, but we can afford the BBC World Service. So I hear from people like you all the time. They send us money. Mind you they're not producers or public radio executives or TV people or anything like that. They're just listeners.

NPR does have its moments, and it is fascinating for us to theorize with one another about how to craft compelling radio. But I, for one, was glad to see a post that gives 'substance' its rightful place alongside 'style'.

Tellingly
Robert Krulwich - October 27, 2002 - #176

So here I am in the twilight of my rounds at Transom, ready to get out the mint julep and sit for a last spell on the porch to watch the sun set, and in strides Tess, who tentatively and eloquently drops a grenade on my front lawn. BOOOOOOOOMMMMMMMMMM!

Yes, I did say NPR is the best news organization in the world (a world which includes the BBC), and I'm sticking to it. That doesn't mean the place doesn't have warts. I agree with Tess about the political coverage, the obsessive interest in polls and strategy. But when Deb Amos talks about women in the middle east, when Mike Schuster explores nukes in Russia (or pretty much anything), when Danny Zwerdling wanders East Africa...I'm transported. Not that this happens all the time, it doesn't, but when we're talking best we're not talking perfect, we're just talking better than anybody else.

When I wake up at 2:30 in the morning and slip my little listening device under the pillow to listen to the radio till I fall asleep, the BBC is on in New York, and while sometimes it is superb, and often more feisty and contentious than the always-polite NPR folks, much more often it is a dry, cool, detached and very, very dense about places that are unfamiliar and never really painted in; Good radio should etch scenes in my mind, let me go places; the BBC too often tells me about a horse race, a rivalry, an intrigue but doesn't let me feel the sweat, see the faces, scan the landscape.

That said, I agree with Tess about This American Life. When they decide to do News... Sara Vowel's coverage of Al Gore's controversial speech to a grade school class, the story about the Mayor of Cicero, Illinois, the deportation show--those outings are so careful, so compelling and so well-written, so seamlessly put together, it's weird to say, but tellingly often the Features Folks can out-news the Newsies... Which is just to say that great craftsmanship rules.

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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