Harnessing Luck as an Industrial Product

Ira Glass

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

If this sounds like exaggeration, here's a typical report from when I was in my mid-twenties. It opens with sound, hubbub, and Muzak from a grocery store. I begin:

> It's not such a long way from the local grocery store to the international debate over whether sorghum and meat production are causing corn to decline in Latin America.

Oh right. That debate. Which doesn't actually exist.

> There's a general air of prosperity here, partly thanks to Mexican imports of U.S. grains, which help boost our farm economy.

From the choice of words to the sentence structure to the idea at its heart, it would be difficult to write more boringly.

> Mexico is now one of our biggest grain customers, buying a half billion to a billion dollars worth every year, including corn to feed its people and sorghum to feed its livestock. This helps cut our own trade deficit and benefits everyone in the U.S. economy. But in Mexico this policy has led to fewer tortillas for the poor, and unappetizing tortillas for everyone else.

What's sad is that the idea behind this story is actually kind of interesting. If I were to summarize that idea today, I'd say: Because it's so profitable to sell food to the U.S., the best farmers in Mexico export to us instead of feeding other Mexicans. We eat better, and Mexicans eat worse. Cool, right? But the way I wrote this at twenty-six, it's hard to even tell what the story is about. The language is stilted. I throw around terms like "trade deficit" and "imports of U.S. grains," not to mention "general air of prosperity," as if these are phrases people say out loud. It violates one of the basic laws of radio: that you should never say a sentence on the air that you couldn't say in a normal dinner conversation.

What's more, the tone is all wrong. There's no pleasure, no sense of discovery, no humor, no genuine human moment, no fun. And I'm a horrible reader, underlining every other word for emphasis.

A few years ago, one of the producers of *This American Life*, Alix Spiegel, had an idea for a story about chickens, and I remembered that I'd worked on a similar idea as part of this same supermarket series. I dug up a tape. She listened. "There's nothing in here," she reported to me, "showing any talent at all. There's nothing in here that indicates that you were ever going to get it."

I think for anyone starting off in any kind of creative work, this is the most daunting thing about it, this period when you're lost, not very skilled, and you have no idea if you'll ever get the skills you're hoping for. For some people this period just lasts a year or two. For me, it took eight years.

I did everything I could think of to speed things along. I forced myself to do a lot of stories, put myself in a position where people were expecting work out of me. Sometimes these were paid gigs. Sometimes they were free. And I created little projects for myself. Many of these were designed to sidestep my shortcomings as a writer and reporter. I'd interview people, get them to tell me amazing anecdotes from their lives, and then edit myself out completely. To make the transitions work from one quote to the next, I'd use music.

BY THE TIME I was in my thirties, I was getting reporting assignments from NPR, and on any given story, in addition to whatever my editor wanted, I had my own goals. For instance, every story—even the stories thrown

together in one day—had to have a tape-to-tape transition. That is, the story would go from one quote directly to the next . . . or from a quote to location sound to another quote, with no narration. This was to keep me alert to pacing. Too many radio stories get into this rhythm of script then quote then script then quote then script then quote. That's poor craftsmanship. And boring.

Every story also had to have some moment that was there just to amuse me. A funny moment, an emotional moment, some original observation I'd made on the scene that no other reporter had. This could be just one nice line in the script.

Every story had to have someone who was more than a talking head, spouting policy points. Someone had to have human flesh to them, human motivation, a little humor, a real emotion. This sometimes only took a line of description, a thought about who they were and why they believed what they believed, a surprising moment, a funny interaction with me on tape.

Which brings me to my next point. Every story had to have some moment where I was in the tape, talking to someone. I did this because I'd noticed that in other people's stories, the most interesting stuff usually came when they interacted with the people in the stories, where there was a back and forth. It allowed for a different kind of drama in the stories, the drama of someone being charming or dogged or wheedling or funny with another person. This didn't come easily to me. Like most beginning radio reporters, I didn't like to hear myself on tape. I didn't like how I sounded asking the questions. I was awkward. I was cloying. Trying too hard one way or another. It was embarrassing. But at some point I decided that omitting this kind of tape meant I was also eliminating a certain drama from my stories, throwing away one of the most powerful tools at my disposal, and I forced myself through it, in story after story. Slowly, I got better at asking questions on tape. I still think the quickest way beginning radio reporters can make their stories more interesting is to get themselves on tape, asking tough questions, cajoling, joking, really talking to the interviewee.

Another discovery that changed everything was when I realized I could imitate the people I liked on the radio. I know that doesn't sound profound. Or dignified. But people in every other creative medium do it: painters and songwriters and filmmakers. It's part of learning your craft.

The writer David Sedaris has said that when he was starting out he would copy passages from favorite books. "I wanted to sense what it must have been like to write these words for the first time," he declared. "I would type them hesitantly, pretending that they had just come to me." I understand that. In my twenties, I'd sit by the radio with a stopwatch and do rough, real-time transcriptions of entire half-hours of *All Things Considered*. How many sentences does a reporter usually say before his first piece of tape? How many seconds is that? How many sentences are there between pieces of tape? What makes an interesting host intro, and a boring one? How many quotes are there in a three-minute story? And in a four-minute story? NPR reporters usually finish one piece of narration and one piece of tape, which is the basic unit of broadcasting—the setup for the tape and then the tape—every thirty-five to forty-five seconds. (Or at least that's what it was in the 1980s when I did my timing.)

I remember stealing this one move I'd heard Alex Chadwick make in a story. It's become one of the signature moves that I and the other people on my radio show do. It defines the style of our show.

I noticed Alex's use of it in a story about frogs.

A high school girl refused to dissect a frog in class. She thought it was inhumane to kill frogs for the purpose of teaching biology. A judge ruled that she still had to do the assignment, but the school had to provide her with a frog that had died of natural causes. I was working at *All Things Considered* and saw this item in the paper and thought it was pretty funny, that some school administrators were now going to have to find frogs who were just on the verge of dying, or had just recently died, and so I produced a little story with Alex about it. To illustrate the hell this high school science teacher would soon find himself in, we went with a naturalist to a swamp to look for some newly dead or dying frogs.

So, okay, you're Alex Chadwick. You have to write the opening of this story. Most of us would be kind of workaday and boring about it. We'd write something summarizing the court case, maybe along the lines of what I just wrote above:

> A few weeks ago in Victorville, California, a high school girl refused to dissect a frog in biology class. Her teacher insisted, and they all ended up in court, where a judge came to this Solomonic

ruling: she still had to do the assignment . . . but the school had to provide her with a frog that died . . . of natural causes. But does such a thing even exist? We decided to figure it out.

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

We've delayed a few days bringing you this story because it hasn't had an ending. It still doesn't, but we're going ahead anyway, with our own modest contribution to developments. Here's the situation: In southern California, in Victorville, at Victor Valley High School, Jennifer Graham, age sixteen, would not carry out an assignment in biology class. She refused to dissect a frog. She said that it bothered her that any creature should have to die so that she could cut it open for study. It was a matter of principle. And as with many such issues, it wound up in court.

On Monday, a judge in Los Angeles issued this ruling: Jennifer must study the innards of a real frog rather than the plastic model or computer mock-up she'd proposed. But the school must provide a frog which has died of natural causes. That's right, natural causes.

"Excellent idea," responded a lawyer for the school, perhaps happy with any solution. "If we have to station someone down by the swamp, or wherever it is they live, to see them die, we'll do it." And his partner added, "Frogs don't live very long anyway."

Indeed, how difficult could it be with all the frogs in the world to find one that had naturally . . . croaked.

[KERPLUNK, swamp noises]

CHRISTIE CRAWL: Don't stand in one place too long or you get sort of stuck in the muck.

REPORTER: Ah, yeah, I think I am stuck in the muck.

CHRISTIE CRAWL: Great hiding places for frogs.

REPORTER: A naturalist named Christie Crawl—really!—agreed to help us search for a naturally dead frog at a swampy area she called a "wetland" over at the Huntley Meadows Park in Virginia. We waded out to where the dark water was knee deep. Something squawked gently.

CHRISTIE CRAWL: That was a frog . . .

Pretty nice, huh? So let's back up a little, and I'll show you his big move.

. . . it bothered her that any creature should have to die so she could cut it open for study. It was a matter of principle. And as with many such issues, it wound up in court.

See that? The stuff about it being a matter of principle, and the phrase "as with many such issues"? He steps out of the facts of this particular story and toward a big general point about How Things Work. I remember hearing that and noticing the feeling it gave the story and wanting my stories to have that feeling. Just imagine the script without Alex's key phrases:

. . . it bothered her that any creature should have to die so she could cut it open for study. And she wound up in court.

Not as grand, right? Not as *knowing*. I later noticed that lots of great nonfiction writers—Malcolm Gladwell, Michael Lewis, Susan Orlean, James Fallows, David Foster Wallace—are constantly pointing out the general principles at work in anything they're reporting. Here's Michael Lewis, for instance, writing about a teenager who refused to cooperate with a lame government plan: "That's the trouble with fourteen-year-old boys—from the point of view of the social order. They haven't yet learned the more sophisticated forms of dishonesty."

This eventually became such a big part of my style as a writer, and the style of the radio show I work on now, that opening my script for last week's program, I come to an example of it immediately, in the intro to Act One:

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

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

AFTER YEARS OF TRYING, I got to the point where I was reporting stories all the time for NPR's daily news programs, and these stories had scenes and characters and plot twists, funny moments and emotional moments. Some were breaking news. Some were features. NPR sent me into a high school for a year, and I filed a story every couple of weeks about the kids and teachers there, and why it's so hard to change things in a public high school. I also had a few writers I would edit and produce as commentators for *Morning Edition* and *All Things Considered*: David Sedaris, Sandra Tsing Loh. I'd mix music under their commentaries, which was rarely done on NPR.

It seemed like someone could make a nice show that combined these emotional, funny, hard-to-turn-off documentary stories and these amazing radio writers. And in 1995, when Chicago Public Radio moved to a new facility and was looking for an innovative show to put in that building, that's the idea I pitched.

Over the years, I'd developed some very strong ideas about the best way to structure a story for radio, and I employed these on the new show, *This American Life*.

Those ideas are pretty simple. I usually think of a radio story (at least the kind of story we do on *This American Life*) as having two basic parts to it. There's the plot, where a person has some sort of experience. And then there are moments of reflection, where this person (or another character in the story or the narrator) says something interesting about what's happened.

Put another way, there's the action of a story, and then there are the conclusions.

Both have to be pretty interesting. A person can walk through lava, cure a disease, find true love, lose true love, discover he was adopted, discover he was not adopted, have all manner of amazing experiences, but if he (or the narrator) can't say something big and surprising about what that experience means, if the story doesn't lead to some interesting idea about how the world works, then it doesn't work for radio. Or, anyway, it's not going to be as powerful as the best radio stories. The best radio stories have both. So one way to get an ailing story to work (and to determine if it's a story at all) is to figure out what surprising conclusions about the world might come from that story.

And here's something counterintuitive. It's best to try to figure out the

potential Big Ideas in any story before you go out interviewing people. On *This American Life*, we'll talk about these ideas as part of our story-selection process. We won't start a story if we can't imagine the kinds of ideas it'll lead to, the questions it'll answer. We need those at the beginning of the process to help us figure out what tape the reporters will have to get in the field.

SO HOW DO YOU FIND the Big Ideas? Consider this story. It's about a guy, Adam Davidson, whose mom is Israeli and whose dad is American. When he was a teenager, Adam read the biography of David Ben-Gurion, the founder of the state of Israel. Ben-Gurion was a compulsive diarist, and when Adam was sixteen, he decided to keep his own diary, writing each day with the quiet conviction that he, Adam, was destined for a fate like Ben-Gurion's. Someday he would be the prime minister of Israel.

Adam's a regular contributor to our show, and doing the story was mainly an excuse to read his cringe-worthy teenage diary entries on the air. Here's a sample:

ADAM [reading]: January 9, 1987. There's so much wrong with Jews in Israel that I'm going to have a job ahead of me. One thing is the lack of any strong Jewish identity among most Jews. This attitude sickens me. I do not know exactly what I will do, but if this situation continues when I'm a bit older, than watch out world Jewry, here comes Adam!

IRA: [incredulous laughter]

ADAM [talking now, not reading]: And "COMES ADAM!" was all in capital letters.

Interviews for this style of story (and most interviews I do for our radio show) generally take the following form: For a while I get the person to lay out the plot of what happened, getting them to be very specific about each plot point, about what people said to each other at the pivotal moments, expanding and commenting on any little details that happen to interest and amuse me. In this case that included reading from diary entries. This is usually a chronological rendition of the story. We start at the beginning and go through the whole thing. Sometimes I'll make them tell a key section two or three times if I feel like I don't have it yet. "Wait, wait, wait," I find myself saying. "Just give me that part again so I can be sure it's clear. What did he say to you, and what did you do? Just tell me again."

And then there's the part of the interview—really, it can be interspersed throughout the interview—where I look for the Big Ideas. Once I had Adam explain the diary and read a bunch of funny excerpts, I started fishing around, asking every idea-oriented question I could possibly think of.

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

In the end, out of all the questions I asked, two led to interesting thoughts. One came from the questions about what sort of kid he'd been. Adam said he was awkward, disliked for being a know-it-all at school, never had a girlfriend, and so it was nice when he was sixteen to have this alternate life in his diary, as a future world leader.

ADAM: I didn't have much angst about being the future prime minister of Israel. I was very calm and confident and comfortable with it. And I had so much angst about every other aspect of my life, and so I now see it as, maybe it was a good solution, you know? It was a good way to deal with what I was going through to have this space where I could just be, you know, one of the greats. I'm not just a sixteen-year-old kid who, you know, is having crushes and, you know, a hopeless geek who can't get a girl to kiss him, being scared and confused about growing old. I'm the future prime minister of Israel, and everything goes through that.

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

IRA: And Adam, what would the sixteen-year-old think of you now?
ADAM: I think he'd be really disappointed. I think he'd be really sad.

I didn't expect this at all, and when he said it, I knew we were onto something good. So I stayed with it.

IRA: Because you're not the prime minister of Israel?
ADAM: Yeah, because I just have such a small life. I mean, I remember I was really disappointed and really sad about my parents. I mean, I was reading biographies, of course, about all the prime ministers in Israel. And I would just think about my parents and think, how do you wake up every day knowing that your actions won't affect millions of people? Like, how is that enough motivation? You know, just to have your petty little craft and your petty little family and your small little apartment, you know. It just seemed pathetic.
[pause]

At this point I've gotten to that place that's so hard to get to in any radio interview. He's talking completely from the heart. He's talking about himself, but he's also describing something universal. Honestly, if you've never felt that feeling, that way of looking at your parents, then you were not a teenager in America. It's so big and easy to relate to. This is the kind of tape I live for. But Adam continued:

And they have the kind of life, you know, that basically, I want for myself. Just to have a craft that I enjoy and make a living at and have a family.

He's working out an idea that's in his head, in real time, out loud. Trying to make sense of something that touches him deeply.

When I get to this rarified place with an interviewee, I do everything possible to try to stay there. I try to keep the trance going. I ask as many follow-up questions as I can think of, spelling out all the implications of what's being said.

IRA: What you're saying, though, is that the sixteen-year-old you would be cringing at the thirty-year-old you just as the thirty-year-old version is cringing at the sixteen-year-old.
ADAM: Yeah, that's very true. Yeah. He would be very, very disgusted if he heard this radio piece.
IRA: And embarrassed.
ADAM: And embarrassed. He'd be really embarrassed. It would seem like I had settled. In a pathetic way.

This sequence takes a small, funny story and makes it special. But to get that nice answer on tape—to get so lucky—I had to try dozens of different things during the interview. I threw out all sorts of half-baked questions, speculations, and proddings. To give you a sense of just how far-ranging and ill-conceived some of these were, here's a transcription of some of the Big Idea questions that went nowhere in that one-hour interview.

Although it's hard to resist the temptation, in the interests of honesty and pedagogy, I am not cleaning up my often dreadful syntax and word choices.

> I wonder how old you were when you crossed over to when, if you read the diary, you would cringe after it? Do you think like two years after you wrote it? Four years? Six years?
>
> Do you think you're doing things now that you'll cringe at sixteen years from now?

There are lots of questions about cringing in this interview, because it was done for a show we were putting together about "cringes" (though, as often happens, it eventually ended up in a completely different episode).

> Well, the thing that makes the diary cringe-worthy is that the sixteen-year-old you so aggressively believes certain things that seem so wrong-headed to you now, and I'm wondering do you even believe things as aggressively as this sixteen-year-old now? Do you believe in anything this aggressively?
>
> Do you still believe that you have a destiny that you are supposed to fulfill, and that you could fail at it?
>
> I wonder if seeing who has ended up as the prime minister—as you and I record this it's Ariel Sharon—gives you any sort of comfort in the fact that maybe it's not the most exalted job in the world?

IRA: Now, we should point out that you weren't in Israel at all.

ADAM: During the writing of this diary I wasn't in Israel at all. It reminds me of the fact that many historians believe that much of the Bible was written in Babylonian exile hundreds of years after the events that they mention, you know, King David or the Exodus of Egypt, and the Bible was infused with passion specifically because no one who wrote it had any access to the stuff they were writing about.

IRA: Wait, what does that have to do with the diary?

ADAM: Just that this diary was written by a kid outside of Israel.

IRA: Oh, I see, much like the Jewish people when they wrote the Bible under this theory, in exile, away from the Holy Land. You, yourself, were exiled from the Holy Land.

ADAM: In exile from the Holy Land, away from the nation that I would some day serve and lead.

IRA: You were in New York City, and so you were creating your document.

ADAM: Exactly, yeah.

IRA: Your Torah, if I will.

ADAM: [laughs] Right. This is the Torah of Adam Davidson.

So many of the things I said to Adam are embarrassing to see here in print. But this is typical for me. I don't want to sound dumb on the air, but I'm willing to sound dumb during an interview. And trying lots of different ideas, including dumb ones, is the only way I know to get the kind of tape I want.

And yes, lots of times I discover that either no one in the story has anything interesting to say about what happened, or the facts of the story turn out differently than I thought, or some other damn thing fails to fall into place and the story just dissipates into vapor. Half the interviews I do never make it onto the air for this very reason. Our radio show's budget is built around the premise that we'll kill (and pay for) a third of everything we start.

But I've made peace with the idea that doing this kind of work always amounts to going out in the world, poking around, trying one thing after another and waiting for luck to strike. If you want to get hit by lightning, you have to wander around in the rain for a while.

It's funny that when you decide you want to do creative work—journalism or music or films or whatever—nobody tells you how much of your time you'll be spending simply hunting for something worth writing about. I remember when I was young, looking around at all the other reporters, it seemed like they all had a million ideas, without even trying. I wondered what was wrong with me. I didn't realize that searching around for stories was a big part of the job, and if I spent half my time doing that, I was doing as well as anybody else.

Nobody tells you to amuse yourself either. Now that I'm here in the next-to-last paragraph of this essay, the thought occurs to me that that's one of the biggest things I learned along the way too. That the easiest way to make something that other people will love is to be out for my own fun.

So that's how I see my job now: To try a thousand things until something interesting happens. To push on the half-baked ideas and stories as hard as they can be pushed. And to follow my curiosity. To keep trying different things until luck kicks in. Luck will always kick in.

Covering Home

Katie Davis

Washington, D.C., January 1995

I HOLD MY MICROPHONE in my lap as the cop turns up Fifteenth Street. "Lots of guns where I'm taking you." I know he's not bragging. The year has barely started, and D.C. is counting up shootings—on the streets and in schools.

The cop picks up Columbia Road, near my home. *Don't know this way.* Every morning I take the bus downtown, my pocket radio piping the morning news into my earplugs until I reach National Public Radio. I get to work two hours early to read the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Clip, pitch, book interviews. Cut tape, write, and put the story on the air. That's my job and all I want is more hours in the day to do it.

"Gonna check behind Fuller," says the cop. I am always thinking about the big international stories like South Africa. Just days before, I asked the foreign editor to send me there to do a follow-up to an earlier trip in the mid-1980s when I was sent to produce stories on the fight against apartheid. I spent time in Alexandra Township as the young people made their stand in the rocky fields. They danced their fury, sang their change. The soldiers faced them with rifles; the young people picked up the rocks at their feet. This was the story I knew; the names of the underground leaders, the details of their strategy to make the black townships impossible to govern. I knew almost nothing about the city I had grown up in, the young people who were my neighbors.

The cop cuts his lights and coasts into an icy alley. "I'm going in here." I roll tape. "There, down by the end," the cop nods. A figure is hunched inside a puffy coat. "See the way that guy is weighted down on the left? Could mean a gun in his pocket." Last year, 121 handguns were confiscated in this neighborhood. The cop clicks his radio, tells the dispatcher, "I'm