

Voice and Meaning

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[Editor's note: This essay first appeared on transom.org, "a showcase and resource for new public radio."]

Dear Transomistas,

It was daunting to have Jay Allison's invitation to be a guest on Transom.org, because I'm no insider to radio production. I do work in a cousin genre – narrative journalism in print – in books, magazines, weekly and daily papers. There's substantial overlap, but natural differences. A few public radio people often joined 10 or a dozen print journalists in my writing workshops during my decade as a writer-in-residence at Boston U. and some join my writing workshop at Harvard's Nieman Foundation for Journalism.

My writing seminars work on print pieces, and the radio folks are always among the quickest and most fluent at structure – at treating a piece not as a topical outline, but an assembly of sequential sensory details that nail down for the audience the immediacy of a set scene. Perhaps they sometimes do this part of print-piece construction haphazardly because in broadcast production, ambient sound and the attitudes redolent in a subject's voice and recorded situation often accomplish that work in passing.

On the other hand, the radio (and film) people, when writing print articles, seem less likely to imply relevant nuances of character. And sometimes they need reminding to include a few just-right sensory details that nail down for the audience the immediacy of a set scene. Perhaps they sometimes do this part of print-piece construction haphazardly because in broadcast production, ambient sound and the attitudes redolent in a subject's voice and recorded situation often accomplish that work in passing.

And it isn't always clear in early drafts when the radio people intend some print passages to be taken ironically – as utterance to be doubted – a handy device to signal distancing from some character's statement or to make the audience question a proffered explanation. The radio folks often justly count on a character's or a moderator's tone of voice – not words or specification of detail – to transmit the same signal quite forcefully.

Over the years, I've coproduced a handful of public radio pieces and a public TV documentary. I've learned from these few efforts, and from teaching radio people in my writing workshops, and also from daily life as an affectionate listener to our Boston public radio stations: WBUR and WGBH. These experiences lead me to suggest that we devote some time and space to exploring the role of voice in narrative work – appropriately, a term that implies tone, an audio matter.

We navigate the world taking in not just the nominal, stated, surface-content of spoken information, but also unstated, subtextual emotional cues, forceful but nearly untranslatably subtle information contained in tone of voice. This information about personality comes to us through phrasing and melody. Without even being acknowledged, it comes to us that this or that character we are listening to in a radio piece is in an emotional state of ferocity, or silliness or fury, despondence, detachment, lightheartedness, confusion, ignorance, authoritative confidence – these are just a few samples among many delicate, elusive emotional circumstances that determine a listener's take on the meaning of a piece as surely as any list of concrete facts does.

I'm told that radio people use the term "voice" another way – as a verb, as in "I'm going to go voice my words..." meaning sit in the studio and record one's written text – one's introductory material or voice-over ambient sounds, or segues between actualities.

Here, the term "voice" is related to that informal radio verb, but it's used, unsurprisingly, as writing teachers use it: Voice is the personality of the teller of the story. Defining it that way sets it up as something determined by audience perception, as well as issued forth by the writer – it's an audience member's ongoing, developing sense of the person who's telling the story.

In writing your script, if you can deepen and broaden and complicate the storyteller's voice, you can deepen and broaden and render more complexly human the content of the work.

Let me offer you a story that we might as well call:

The Night Of The Barking Dog And The Firetrucks

Throaty barks awaken me. I squint at the clock. Hmmm, it's 2:17 a.m. and I'm now in a fix. I've got to teach tomorrow, and I have a writing deadline; I'm annoyed because I teach grumpily and write ploddingly on three hours of sleep.

Asleep and awake, it's the nature of the human beast to scan for danger constantly, assisted by our delicate five senses, a portion of intellect, and adequate memory. A powerful narrative sensibility, seemingly hardwired in each of us, evaluates what the senses and intellect and memory divine, especially after one of the senses sounds its warning beep-beep that a danger threshold may have

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been crossed.

Beep-beep – there’s a slight smoky smell of smoke. Nope, no fire, just a cigarette smoker on the street below. I drift half-awake, jolted again by more of those barks.

I evaluate the threat by trying on a sequence of barking-dog narratives for fit:

a. Marauding wolves have come down from the steppes – I must barricade the house and find my axe.

Well – no steppes near here. I haven’t seen my axe in years; and anyhow, there’s just one barking creature – no pack.

b. My sons are up late, they’ve got “Lassie” on, and I must go shut off the TV or at least their bedroom door. I shuffle down the hall. Both sons are out cold, the one breathing deeply, the other snoring quietly, neither barking.

c. Hadn’t I vaguely noted – perhaps while walking home – that this neighborhood guy, only know him to nod, was out there this evening, being hauled along by a new, huge, high-strung mutt that was barking and leaning its way down the street? In fact, I convince myself that I recognize the dog-voice. The Narrative Way has reassured me that I’m not about to be devoured.

Now that story has helped me define and estimate the danger, a defensive plan springs to mind: Close window and find ear plugs. I sleep.

Brain scientists tell us that narrative is part of the scouting-for-trouble toolkit that has evolved right along with the human condition, an ancient cognitive skill that does for each of us what sentinels used to do for the towns they watched over from atop high encircling walls.

Sentinel work is awfully close to what journalists do, in the daily paper or on the morning news. Reporters scan the modern world and report to local listeners and readers. They scout for trouble, and also for that antidote to communal trouble – sources of social cohesion within a community. They report on terrorists probing our gates, and they congratulate the local ball team, covering in one short newscast, community danger from without, and community bonding from within.

I’m awakened again.

This time, it’s fire trucks squawking outside the window. I squint at the clock. An hour has passed. It’s 3:17. I recall that class I’ve got to teach and that looming article deadline. I feel for my spectacles, sigh, and peer out the window. The fire trucks are awfully loud, and they’re not even right below the window. They’re up the street, setting up a block away by some shops and old houses. That’s far enough off (I check this theory by constructing a few quick narrative scenarios about how flames might spread, or not) so there’s no danger. I pull a pillow over my head again.

At seven, as usual, I’m up, soon down the street in a line at the neighborhood coffee shop. I’m a dutiful citizen. That’s where I habitually ingest the day’s newspaper along with a morning latte. I also catch the news on the coffee shop radio, which is always set to “Morning Edition.”

And here comes that damned neighbor, pulled by the barking dog, which he ties up outside. He joins the line behind me. I want to complain about the dog, but find forgiveness in my soul and instead settle for asking, “Did those fire trucks wake you up, too, last night?”

“You bet they did,” he says, “First this new dog of mine wakes me, and then it’s the fire trucks, right in front of my apartment!” He points out at the street. “I couldn’t sleep with all that racket outside my window. I work as a reporter at the local paper, so even though I knew I’d be tired, I slipped on my bathrobe and slippers and walked outside to check things out...”

Well, this is downright optimal for me as a news consumer. Here’s a genuine local reporter, and he’s eyewitness to the cataclysmic ferocity, the sudden personal loss times the number of burned out souls, of an apartment-house fire. I ask him the reader’s basic question: “What happened?”

And looking right at me in general (I am news-audience now), ignoring me in particular (it’s his mission to inform the citizenry, not chat with his neighbor), he says in emotionless radio-reporter voice: “A fire at the corner of Third and Elm Streets destroyed several units in the north wing of Brookville Apartments, 123 Brookville Street. Damage is estimated at \$800,000, according to Assistant Fire Chief Charles J. McGillicuddy. There were no reported casualties. The cause of the early-morning blaze is under investigation.”

And what do I do? I mean, this is a social situation. Citizenship is one thing, but do I really want to be stuck at breakfast with this wooden character?

I duck. I move away. It’s morning news time, and here’s the walking, talking morning news. One might even argue that I’ve lucked out and a local, reliable, factual, professional source, and like the rolled-up paper that comes flying onto my stoop every morning, here’s an earnest eyewitness delivering his account directly to the listening audience.

Nevertheless, I don’t invite him to sit at my table and tell me even more – for the same reasons that many people these days are not buying their local papers any more. Newspapers are in a business crisis (paid circulation declined 2.5 percent nationally in the past six months). Radio news has dimmed long ago on many commercial stations.

What happened? In his fire report, the neighbor assumed a formal voice of an official reporter, and in that role, he’d declined – sorted through and eliminated, didn’t even consider, perhaps – many crucial narratives that he must have sensed, that flare into being right along with a fire. No sensory report of searing heat and acrid smoke. No haunted residents straggling out, no little girl looking in at her orange bedroom window, no casual, professional firemen, detached from the sorrow and making order of mayhem, lacking the fascinated gleam reflected in the eyes of some of the gathering onlookers, not including one guy in a bathrobe with a noisy dog pulling at him.

This report cautiously mistook enumeration for responsible portrayal, mistook ignoring emotional content for remaining objective, mistook selecting civic, not personal facts for being unbiased. So the account left out most of the story – systematically strained out the parts of available content most likely to engage the listener as a person, although it indeed included material listeners-as-citizens should hear about.

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- ✧ Ernesto Priego
- ✧ Sarah Rich
- ✧ Christopher Scanlan
- ✧ Jonathan Seitz
- ✧ Barry Siegel
- ✧ Ole Soennichsen
- ✧ Gay Talese
- ✧ Tommy Tomlinson
- ✧ Dan Vergano
- ✧ Paige Williams
- ✧ Jenna Wortham
- ✧ Ben Yagoda and Dan DeLorenzo
- ✧ Carl Zimmer

But there I was, in line at the coffee shop, heedlessly, inseparably, unitarily and indivisibly being all of me, both citizen interested in addresses and damage reports, and whole person, interested in people and human consequences. The reporter/neighbor's decision – which of course I set up in this tale to mimic conventional thinking about what constitutes news – is clearly no fun. And it's not great for business, at a time when papers and radio stations are desperately searching for audience, to toss out the engaging parts, as if engagingness is evidence of triviality and ethical irresponsibility.

Fire has social meaning as surely as civic meaning, and the heat of its personal meanings matches the heat of the blaze. No talk of the dispossessed? No wonder about firefighting? There's so much to say, a fine book to be written by someone willing to dissect the anatomy of a small urban blaze.

Still, the main reason I drank my coffee alone in this story is that the fellow's lapsing into standard newsvoice left me feeling lonely. The voice signals impersonality. He delivered some goods, sure. He even delivered the illusion of fair-mindedness. But he wasn't companionable. When I hear or read the news, I often feel officially constrained, kept back behind some cordon established for my own safety and the greater public good. Fine reporting, to the contrary, is a friend's generous act, leading the audience where it dares not traverse alone.

And fuller exploration of experience simply isn't possible in official newsvoice. That's the point of it. It is drained of the personality of the teller, and there's no one left, then, to sense, evaluate, and make the metaphors that explore what experience is like.

I have a term in my writing workshops for that sort of reporting. I call it sentinel reporting. Consider the names of newspapers: Bugle, Clarion, Patriot-Ledger, Sentinel, Tribune, Guardian. Sentinel reporting selects from the chaos of details about an event those elements that fit into a delimited "civic fact set" – facts that affect city governance, the work of the city, the behavior of people as public citizens – addresses, fire brigade numbers, names of officials, damage amounts, medical conditions, official cause determination. It doesn't deal with quirky stuff, individual, moody stuff, not with peevishness, snits, depressions, triumphal, gloating moments at work, happy seductions, innocent drunks, unshined shoes, smelly bathrooms, compulsive cleaning of same, doesn't acknowledge the excitement of a crowd at a fire – the stuff that fills our real lives, though not architects' glamorous drawings of it.

Insofar as such accounts deal with emotion at all, they confine themselves to the "civic emotion set" – emotions shared by all citizens, basically, and given a multi-ethnic, multi-religious/agnostic, multi-class/multi-racial population, that emotion-set contains few elements: perhaps the civic emotion most commonly explored in the news is pity for endangered children – it's the emotion that most directly and effortlessly crosses tribal lines. So does resentment of criminals. So does admiration of town benefactors. So does sports pride – and pride in the flag, although that's where even the few shared emotions start to get complicated.

It is no accident that there's a stiff way of uttering news, to which we're all habituated by years as listeners and readers. I'd start with a strong presumption that the reasons this is the voice of news must be multiple and strong, because it's counterintuitive that the most engaging, human-scale tales arising from public events are specifically not the traditional center of newsrooms' work. Rather, the mannered and restrictive presentations possible in "newsvoice" represent the standard of what feels to sincere practitioners like ethical professionalism in news organizations across our nation, and world. Why? Perhaps because the diction of newsvoice tames and balances news by depersonalizing it, builds civic experience and civic unity – while still allowing open inspection of major social issues.

Still, in the light of the shrinkage of newspaper circulation, and the rise of narrative journalism as a way of retaining readers, it's worth asking this: If the events of a city's daily life offer up fascinating, thought-provoking tales, why must weak stories be favored by news media?

Disclosing news is a paradoxical activity. It surely seems useful to draw attention to shared danger and to congratulate unifying public events. But when we do so, we become official conveyors of these tidings, public functionaries. It's hard to avoid becoming somehow official. And inside that role, it feels like an act of honor to strain out the irrelevant, the individual, the stuff that isn't, in sum, community experience. This seems like the bias that propels us into the role of guardians, sentinels who watch the city for the public good. Our choosing news voice over quirkier, private voices reflects the (frequently instinctive) choice.

I hope we can explore and refine together here, an important idea for radio producers: that there are other voices available to you, appropriate to the act of sculpting a radio-listening experience for diverse audiences, than the standard sentinel voice. In fact, I'd like to suggest that many sorts of emotions and moods and activities and true pictures of our shared lives simply can't be portrayed in that standard voice.

And yet, if you flip through the day's presentations on public radio stations, or even scout the more individualistic ones aggregated so wonderfully on www.prx.org, most seem to have selected a voice, a diction, and thus a storyteller's stance, that's more conventional than the material and perspectives covered.

How much should and can you break from this conventional voice and still be part of a useful public conversation? How much is possible, given current expectations of editors and other gatekeepers? Can you offer examples of innovators who've explored other ways than this voice of presenting content? Is there a body of radio narrative that points to ways around the limitations of conventional voice? I'm not asking these questions with any pedagogical cunning. I ask as a radio outsider who's frequently marveled that public radio seems often in the forefront of such exploration.

I'll stop my presentation here. I hope I'm quitting in the middle of an exploration. It's the place where I surely need help, as I'm a visitor in this world, here by invitation and your tolerance – and very interested in the topic, in this time when the newsroom is melting away right along with the polar icecaps, and the nature of public news is up for rigorous exploration and redefinition.

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