

## Interview With Juliana Barbassa | Module 1

[00:00:12] **John O'Neil** Welcome back. And I'd like to welcome our guest here today, Juliana Barbassa. Juliana is the deputy books editor of The New York Times, where she previously served as a Latin American editor. Earlier, Julia had been the managing editor of the Americas Quarterly and the Rio de Janeiro bureau chief for the Associated Press. She is the author of the book *Dancing with the Devil in the City of God: Rio de Janeiro on the Brink*.

[00:00:41] **John O'Neil** We're talking this week about a basic idea for explanatory journalism. So, to know what needs explaining and how to explain it is doing something about your audience and what it knows and doesn't. I thought it would be especially interesting to talk with you, Juliana, and someone who's been a reporter outside of the U.S., writing for a U.S. audience and an editor in the U.S. editing reporters who work outside the country. Not to mention dealing with two very different cultures a subject matter and a Latin American coverage and in books. Let's start by talking about the sort of double perspective you're able to have, both when you're working in Rio, when you're editing in New York, and somebody who could see things from the point of view of the people being covered and the people reading the coverage. How did you approach a story as a foreign correspondent covering another country?

[00:01:42] **Juliana Barbassa** Well, I think the main thing to keep in mind when writing anything at all from anywhere is who is your audience and to keep them in mind. Any subject that we approach the world we write about is very big and messy, and there are all kinds of facts and fascinating details, and the ones to include the frame that we apply to the story depends on who your audience is and what they need to understand the story that you want to tell them. So, one thing to keep in mind, I think one thing that's changed is that audience is not as narrowly defined in journalism as it once was. For much of the history of this of this thing that we do, you were a reporter writing about a place for a situation that your readers could not access themselves, whether that was another country or, you know, a crime happening around the corner. You could assume that you were the one delivering information to them. And now with the Internet, anyone, anywhere can read anything. They can see videos; they can see photos. They can have a greater or lesser degree of understanding about the place or event you're writing about. So, you know, when I was writing about Latin America or editing Latin American coverage, I had to assume that my audience was both in the United States and in Latin America. So, you have to keep them both in mind. So, it's a balancing act.

[00:03:06] **John O'Neil** And the Times is an international publication as well as a as well as an American one.

[00:03:15] **Juliana Barbassa** Exactly. The Times, the Associated Press. But honestly, you know, most outlets that you're going to write for once something is on the Internet, it can be read by people anywhere. And so, it should be both understandable to people anywhere, but also appealing and interesting to people anywhere. Right. You don't want to leave out somebody who's new to the story, but you also don't want to bore or even offend with simplistic or unnecessary explanation. But somebody who is deeply familiar with the story and is looking to you for insight. So, you know, as I was saying that doing this is a balancing act. Thinking about what to live and what to keep out, but also when to include the information, how to include the information so as to be both comprehensive but also compelling in what you're doing.

[00:04:08] **John O'Neil** And to step back even before the writing begins. There's the question of what stories to pursue and how did your sense of the audience or the thinking about the audience shaped or what you might have chosen to do?

[00:04:26] **Juliana Barbassa** Well. I feel like more than more than shaping which stories I pursued. It really shaped where in the story I started telling it. You know, there are no easier or more complicated stories, really. What there is, is a, you know, stories that you have to step further and further back to tell and stories that you can start closer in. You know, the more you share with your audience, the more you can assume your audience knows about the context of what you're writing about. The closer in you can start to the to the action of the story. A story that requires a lot more context. You have to start from further back. You have to give more sort of broad, you know, broad strokes explanations for people to understand. So, all stories are easy to tell if you start from a place of shared understanding or you make sure that you give enough information so you have a shared basis of understanding, and then you build toward complexity.

[00:05:33] So one thing that I would always say to reporters, especially when they're new to writing for an international audience or new to the field, is when they're looking at something that looks very complicated and requires a lot of context is to take that 10,000-foot view of the issue and think of what are the big broad strokes that anyone approaching this story needs to understand to really have enough context to make sense of the of the story. Once your readers have that, you can move in closer and focus in on the issue that you that you really want to highlight and on the details that are really going to make the story rich and are going to make the issue come to life and that are going to be the things that are often very compelling to those who already know the basic context.

[00:06:27] And so a lot of the stories that I wrote, you know, from when I was a foreign correspondent or that I edited once I was an editor, they often dealt with very complex social issues, political issues, economic issues. But they often would start with something like Brazil, the largest country in South America, or Brazil, the largest democracy in South America. You know, these very basic sort of establishing points that are hopefully not so basic that their offensive, you know, that they're easy to read past too, they're quick and succinct. So, they're not going to be offensive or annoying to those who already know that about Brazil. But they will give a very basic sort of shared ground to those who don't know that. And so, anybody can get on board with a story that starts on and a fundamental like that, and then you can build on it.

[00:07:20] **John O'Neil** And so as an editor, that might be the kind of thing you'd be looking for in the raw copy that's filed to you, and thinking you'll look and see what we need to add and what's here that's good. And what are the holes you need to fill in on the micro or macro level.

[00:07:40] **Juliana Barbassa** Exactly. And what do we need to fill in and where do you need them in the story? Right. Where do you need them for the reader to understand that section? Sometimes you need to weave in something that small but essential to the understanding of the story, because without that, the reader can't move on. And sometimes you can also weave them in at a point that helps, that serves your narrative storytelling. You know, you can take a break in the narrative, for example, and weave in a chunk of facts that are going to help heighten the tension that you were building, you know, by forcing the reader to wait a little longer to hear what happens next in the story. So, you think about the what, but also the when and the how.

[00:08:23] **John O'Neil** It's a very interesting observation in terms of the piece. We're going to we're going to look at now, let me share my screen, which always takes me a minute to remember how to do. So, this was a piece you edited in 2020 about infant mortality and maternal mortality in Venezuela. It's by Julie Turkewitz and Isayen Herrera. What did they and you think that readers in the U.S. or elsewhere would need to know about this specific situation or the broader situation? And what was your overall goal and what you'd like them to take away from the story?

[00:09:14] **Juliana Barbassa** One thing we could assume most readers know about Venezuela is that it's in dire straits. I think most people have heard that it's in economic collapse and there's a lot of outmigration. But what does that mean? In this case, we wanted to show readers not just abroad, but even in Venezuela, where the media is not as free to report as they'd like, just how bad conditions had gotten for women there. For me, the core of the story, the sentence around which I wanted to build the entire story is: "to give birth in Venezuela today is to risk death -- for both the woman and her child."

[00:09:58] It's hard to understand the degree to which that's true because the country stopped releasing data years ago, the information literally became a state secret. And so, we wanted with this story to show how dire the situation really was by weaving together the very powerful stories of women who are trying to deliver children and risking their lives and the lives of their children in the process, and in parallel to give sort of the information structure around which the story, on which the story needs to hang essential. To truly understand the story of these women and what's happening to them, you need to understand the broad story of Venezuela's political-economic collapse over time. And so, we don't want to overburden the story of these women, which is very dramatic with these facts. But we need to give just enough to sort of provide the scaffolding right around which these stories can hang, and that will help the reader make sense of the totality of the situation that these women are existing in.

[00:11:07] **John O'Neil** And so to create an overall picture and mixing in very specific stories of specific women and some very general sort of, as you say, "scaffolding points" about the country and the society and the economy and sort of like. Did you hope to put it all together or is it sort of stop and go? Or just like, how do you find that? How do you how do you feel your way towards that structure?

[00:11:38] **Juliana Barbassa** Well, this was this was a story in which we wanted the reader to have a very particular experience while reading. Right. We wanted them to care deeply about something that they could easily brush off. It's another story about terrible things happening to people in yet another country that is undergoing any number of tragedies. You know, it can it can feel very familiar to the reader. Right. So, we wanted to really sort of, you know, grab them and make them pay attention. And to do that, you know, we have these very powerful stories of women. We start very, very close in, with one woman. Tell the story very simply, anybody can understand a woman about to give birth, sort of the mounting distress that that represents. We did it in very short, tight sentences. And then when we broke for those broad informational paragraphs, we did it in a place that, I hoped, would heighten tension instead of interrupt the narrative. So, we have this woman about to give birth, begging for help in front of this hospital feeling like she's going to die if she doesn't get that help. And then we break to tell you about Venezuela's health care system, which was once one of the best in Latin America, is now in a state of collapse and the country's economy is crippled and the whole country is being overseen by an increasingly authoritarian government. And then we start to sort of spiral back down toward the story of the woman we say, few parts of the system have been as

damaged as the maternity wards, and this sometimes forces doctors to turn women away. So, then we're back to the women, right? We went very broad, broad strokes, big scaffolding. And then we start to sort of, you know, move back toward the story that we're telling of this one woman and other women like her.

[00:13:45] **John O'Neil** I mean, it's a remarkable piece. And as you'll see here, just really horrific art and very powerful art. And it's a big story. It's a long story. It's not it's not your AP news dispatch. But given all this, there are still things that you felt like you would like to explain more if you were able to. Or just things that just overflow the structure in, right?

[00:14:14] **Juliana Barbassa** Yes. I mean, this this was a story in which we had to make really, really hard decisions about what to include and what to leave out. Months of reporting went into this. The reporters were extraordinarily careful about, you know, the women they followed. They followed them for weeks. You never know when somebody is really going to give birth, what the experience is going to be like. So, they followed several women for a long period of time. They spent a lot of time with doctors. So, we had such a wealth of material and the story could only be so long. And so, we had to choose very, very carefully the details that we were going to include and the balance of those big sort of scaffolding graphs to details. And there was a lot of fantastic material that I think is very important that simply didn't make it because it wasn't close enough to the core of the story. For example, the experience of, you know, we touch a little bit on the experience of doctors and nurses and other medical personnel that are working in this environment and what it means for them to not be able to do their jobs properly, to see patients that they'd like to help in distress. But this was not the story in which we were going to tell of their experience. So, we had to do a lot of cutting and trimming. In that sense, it wasn't so much about context, but about the story that we were choosing to tell right now, like we can tell that story another time.

[00:16:01] **John O'Neil** I mean, it's sort of something that's going to come up along those courses, the idea of keep asking yourself, what is it that we're trying to explain? And having a focus and having a purpose is sort of an invisible part of explanatory journalism because it leads to the parts, they get left out you don't see, but then make what's there all the more powerful.

[00:16:24] Now we're going to switch to a very different topic and a different kind of story. You're now in the books department. And let me get it clear, for people listening that this does not mean the book review means the part of the daily paper that covers books in the world of publishing. So, it seems very different. And how different do you feel your audience is and as a factor into what you what you pursue?

[00:17:04] **Juliana Barbassa** It is very different, feels very different. By and large, I can assume the audience is more American and more familiar with the world that I'm describing of the world of books and literature. And I often can make many more assumptions about what they come into the story already knowing and their familiarity with the context in which the story takes place. So sometimes instead of that 10,000-foot view, we can take a 5000-foot view, you know, start in a little closer, essentially.

[00:17:37] **John O'Neil** I'm going to share my screen again. We're going to look at this piece. Which is interesting as we... So how would you describe this space?

[00:18:05] **Juliana Barbassa** Well, it was a it was a piece that was very fun to work on, I think. I really thought of it as a roller coaster ride. But at its core, it's really a piece of straight explanatory journalism. Its intent was to pull back the curtain on an aspect of publishing that even people who love books and are very familiar with the world of books sometimes don't understand very well, which is how to get published. Like, what are all the steps that you go through between writing your manuscript at home by yourself, to getting an agent, to getting your manuscript before a publishing house, to signing a contract to, you know, all of the steps between like writing and getting your book in a, in a bookshop window, essentially. So, the goal of this of this project from the start was to pull back the curtain on that and to take readers step by step. And you could do that in a very didactic and I would think very boring way, like step one, find an agent. Step two, etc... And so, we came up with this conceit of going through the emotional roller coaster ride with an author that a lot of people will know and be familiar with. Her book was sold very well, it was a bestseller. And so again, I was trying to find some common points with the reader. They'll have heard of this writer; they'll have heard of this book. Even if you've never wondered what it would be like to write a book of your own and get it published. You may know this book and you may be curious like; how did it work? You know, how did it work for her? So I was still trying to find common points and I was still trying to build a narrative that would give readers a an interesting reading experience, right, sort of the up and down of not knowing if your manuscript is going to be read, if it's going to be taken, if it's going to go to auction, if it's going to get a good price, if it's going to sell, once it hits the stands, if it's going to hit some celebrity, you know, book group that's going to make it go big at every point. I used the author's own anxiety and tension and uncertainty and then elation to propel the reader through what is essentially a very step-by-step look at how to get a book published.

[00:20:45] **John O'Neil** And it just strikes me now that because you've picked a first-time author, you're giving to your readers what was her learning experience. Because it was all new to her and it both makes it more novel and also provides you with the opportunities to scaffold. Because she needed to learn, how does an auction work? She needed to learn, what does it mean when they're selling it to them to the marketing staff and things like that?

[00:21:21] **Juliana Barbassa** Exactly. And that's exactly what we had in mind when choosing the person that we were going to focus on. So, in this case, it wasn't so much what context do we need, but what character is going to allow us to touch on the context that would be most helpful to our readers? Right. So, we deliberately picked somebody who was a debut novelist who was not from New York, not already embedded in the publishing industry. And in some way, somebody who didn't have a ton of connections, wasn't an influencer, didn't have a major social media platform, you know, essentially somebody who, you know, she was very serious about what she did, but she had to go through every single one of those steps and learn along the way. And every one of them was difficult and uncertain for her. You know, she could take nothing for granted. And so, she was somebody who was successful but was as close to the average reader as you can be.

[00:22:33] **John O'Neil** So all this has been great because it just strikes me another parallel between these two stories. You're explaining by telling personal stories or putting them in a context that has broader points and broader chances for learning. And they're also both stories about women. Because we want to explain things that are not necessarily the kinds of people and kind of events that are going to be on the front page every day.

That's important, too. But it's important to give voices to people who might not be on the front page.

[00:23:17] **Juliana Barbassa** Yeah. No, I mean, very, very much. That was very much the intent with the Venezuela story. For example, we did a whole series on women in Venezuela because I think in broad strokes, you know, the American public did know something about, like I said, the economic collapse, the political situation there. And one thing they did not know very much about is how it particularly affected women. So, access to birth control, access to child care, access to childbirth. We did a series of stories that were front page stories. This was a front-page story about the kind of people who don't often end up on the front page. And I really think that the way to do that is to think about who your audience is, what they need to understand not just the story, but to understand this is an important story. This is a big deal. And we're going to connect the dots for you because you may not be able to see them readily, but go with us on this one. And by the end, you'll understand why this is major, why this is a front-page story.

[00:24:25] **John O'Neil** Well, and you earn your readers interest and earn your reader's trust at the same time that you're doing. The basic thing that we do is to learn things and share them. And hopefully good things come from this thing. And this has been a good thing. This has been great. Thank you so much, I appreciate your time.

[00:24:50] **Juliana Barbassa** Thank you so much John, I really appreciate this.

[00:24:51] **John O'Neil** Okay. I look forward to reading more pieces like this.

[00:24:57] **Juliana Barbassa** Thank you.

[00:24:58] **John O'Neil** All right.

[00:24:59] **Juliana Barbassa** Take care.