

## Interview With Lisa Beyer | Module 2

[00:00:12] **John O'Neil** Welcome back to module two of explain this our course on explanatory journalism. I'm very glad to have with us this week Lisa Beyer, who is my colleague at Bloomberg News, my colleague in particular on the Quicktake explainer page team that I'm a part of. Lisa has done many other things in her career prior to joining us on Quicktakes. She worked as a foreign correspondent for many years, beginning in Asia. She was the Jerusalem bureau chief for Time magazine and then the foreign editor there.

[00:00:47] **John O'Neil** So, Lisa, we're talking about explaining things within standard news stories and what we need to do to make sure our news stories are clear. Last week we had people on to talk about understanding audiences and what a writer needs to know about who's reading her work and how that's going to shape the task. And so I want to go back to your time as a foreign correspondent, because a foreign correspondent is sort of the epitome of somebody whose job it is to know more about some place that her readers do.

[00:01:23] So we're going to talk about a couple of things that I think you have a valuable perspective on from that time. So we're going to talk about, as you're writing a story, how to think about what to explain or what not to explain. We're going to talk about we use a term of the "nub." The important thing in a story that's the hard thing to explain and then whether to explain these things by just following it into the sort of running narrative of the story, or whether to step back and devote a chunk of the article to that. So I understand you went back in the archives and pulled out some things that I'll show as a separate slide here. But. Where shall we begin?

[00:02:11] **Lisa Beyer** Well, let me just address sort of top line some of the points that you made about what's and what not to explain. Probably I'm not the first person who's going to say to your statement that there's a journalistic expression that you should never underestimate the intelligence of your readers, but never overestimate what they know. And I think that's a really good rule. I heard that early on in my journalistic profession, and I've found it to be a very good rule to live by.

[00:02:41] **Lisa Beyer** So when it comes to explaining things, I think you you certainly don't want to talk down to your readers, and you always want to bear in mind that some of them will know more than others and will understand more than others. But I think you kind of want to air on the on the end of making sure that they have the context and the background to understand the the news that you're giving them. So in terms of what to explain and what not to explain, I think you mean in the direction of explaining, obviously if you have a word count issue. That's the first point I wanted to make.

[00:03:21] **Lisa Beyer** The second point I wanted to make in terms of deciding what to explain and what not to explain is don't think about writing for your fellow journalists or for your editor. Think about obviously, writing for your readers. And we don't always get to know our readers necessarily. Sometimes we know a lot about them, but I, I try to think about...I think a lot of people think about members of their family who might be a reader, friends of theirs, who might be a reader, and the kinds of questions that we find ourselves getting when we talk about our work in a social situation. I think you can use that kind of feedback that you get from people who are not in the media to give you some understanding of what people know and what what they what they don't know.

[00:04:23] **Lisa Beyer** On the issue of how to recognize the nub and what to do about it, I think that generally the nub is going to be the thing that's hard to explain is the thing that's hard to understand for you yourself, because journalists, unless we've been covering a topic for a really long time, where we have for some reason we've come to journalism from some area of specialty. Generally, it's going to be the thing that we have the hardest time understanding ourselves and have to ask a lot of questions.

[00:04:57] **John O'Neil** And we're more professional learners and some things harder to learn than others. So that's a good point.

[00:05:05] **Lisa Beyer** Yeah. And in terms of sort of how to do it, I mean the first thing you have to do is you have to understand it. And the way to understand it, of course, is everything in journalism is to ask a lot of questions. And for me, that's you almost have to be like a child who asks why. And then when you give them the answer, they ask why again, and then you give them the answer they ask again. So, you know, it's not enough to say, you know, when you ask the child who the child says, why is the sky is blue? And you say, well, you know, blue light is scattered more than the other colors. And then the intelligence tells us why is blue light scattered more than others? And then you have to answer that question.

[00:05:50] **Lisa Beyer** So it's it's getting to the but it's getting to the end of the whys to really understand. And I think when you read a story that doesn't explain the nub, it's often a sign that the reporter herself or himself doesn't necessarily understand the topic and is glazing over that. So that's the most important thing, I think. And then in terms of how to, how to explain a nub. And I think very often history and background helps if you explain how and where something came from, where it originated, when it originated. It often makes it easier for the reader to understand it if you go back and obviously analogies help if they're simple and you can convey them.

[00:06:46] **John O'Neil** That's a great point.

[00:06:49] **Lisa Beyer** And then to talk about your third point, which was do you give background explanatory information sort of as you're on the side in subordinate clauses or do you know? Yeah. Obviously it depends. I think that generally it depends how complicated the information is. Generally, it's better if you can sort of ease it in in subordinate clauses and that also has the advantage. That if your reader already knows the information, that your explanatory information that you're giving them, if it's in a subordinate clause, you're not going to turn them off as much as if you stop the narrative and you give a whole new sentence and you say NATO's is a alliance of the the reader who's in the know might think, well, this story might not be for me, because I already know that. So if you put it in, if you put it between commas, they're more likely that readers are more likely to move past the clause that they understand already. Obviously, if it's something more complex, you need to stop the narrative and start a sentence or two that is purely explicit.

[00:08:03] **John O'Neil** That's great. And let's let's now you actually have some examples of of some of each, so.

[00:08:09] **Lisa Beyer** Sure. Okay. So the story that I pulled up just looking in my byline file was the story is actually from 1999 about when Yasser Arafat was head of the Palestinian Authority. This was my job to cover these kinds of things. And he was cracking down on dissent among the Palestinians. And this was a story about that and Time

magazine stories I don't really pay a lot of attention to Time magazine today, so I don't really know what the formula is. But back then, we basically generally started with anecdotal lead. So this is a is a an anecdotal lead, and you're not going to put explaining story material in an anecdotal lead for the most part. So this story references the Palestinian authority in the first sentence, second sentence. But I was aware, I'm aware now. And I was aware then that many readers at time magazine had a mass audience readership at the time. They had 5 million readers all over the world aren't going to necessarily know what the Palestinian Authority is or if they know what it is, they have an idea of what it is, they're not really 100% certain what it is. Is Palestine a state? A government? What is that exactly? So very quickly, at the start of the second paragraph, I injected an explanation of what the Palestinian Authority was at the time and actually still is, which is, I say, Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Authority charged with self-rule in parts of the Gaza Strip and West Bank. And that's just a way of quickly...

[00:10:02] **John O'Neil** That folded in.

[00:10:03] **Lisa Beyer** Folding it in.

[00:10:07] **Lisa Beyer** So that's an example of folding in some necessary explanation, which was you'll see many news stories about the Palestinian Authority that will never explain what it is. But I have always felt that's necessary context for the reader. There's another example in the same story in the middle column where I talk about the Palestinian Council, which is also, again, a proper noun. A reader who is not super familiar with the Palestinian Authority is not going to know what on earth that is. It sounds like some sort of legislative body. And indeed, there there's a comma and I say, a kind of legislature, but I add, with no real power, which is a pretty compact way of telling you what that body is. So, again, that's just an example of very quickly injecting some context.

[00:11:04] **John O'Neil** Okay. And the reason you needed to include a reference to that and an explanation is that I mean, it's just it's a as you say, it's a fairly obscure thing for people who are following it really closely. So why did you end up identifying it and feeling the need to explain it in this story? So there is the issue of the immunity for the guys who are in in trouble with Arafat.

[00:11:41] **Lisa Beyer** Oh, in terms of the council, you mean. Yeah. Yeah. That is correct. I think so. Actually, go back and read the story. Thank you for doing that. Yes, that was the relevance to their work. And yes.

[00:12:02] **John O'Neil** So you had a different story in mind to talk about stepping back and stepping out and doing something as a chunk supposed to an insert. .

[00:12:14] **Lisa Beyer** Yes. So this was a story that I did in 1999. So this was some years ago and it was focused was done on the was done out of Jordan on something called honor killings, which probably a lot of readers at that time probably, most readers, had probably not ever heard that term. I think today probably more readers would have heard that term. Again, the story starts with and anecdotal lead, and it doesn't use the term until we get to the second paragraph and then it defines the term. So we are in the second paragraph and are killing is the intramarried slaughter of allegedly errant females. But that's a little bit generic, errant in what sense? And then I get some background there. Women have endured the custom legal establishments have tolerated or even condoned it. And then I give the news, which is that in Jordan, women were seen really starting to organize and and and fight this phenomenon.

[00:13:17] **Lisa Beyer** And then it's in the third paragraph that I, I think you can call it the nub paragraph where I really dig in and explain to the reader what what are honor killings? What what are we talking about? I give a little bit of background here that there's this Arabic expression that people tend to quote when they talk about honor killings. And then I give a little bit of cultural context that explains sort of the basis of these killings. And and then I give examples of the kinds of errant behavior that leads to these kind of killings. So it sort of gives the parameters of where these in what situations these things take place. So by the time you get to the end of that paragraph, you have a pretty good idea what is meant by honor killings.

[00:14:14] **John O'Neil** And it's interesting because so news is the this rise in activism among women in general. But instead of just saying and the way you structured it is you you set up for the reader what the issue is before you talk about the news that is changing, changing the issue and and you do it in a little bit first and then a bigger chunk of stepping aside from from the narrative once you've established the news.

[00:14:52] I mean I wrote the story gosh. So many years ago I can't. Obviously I don't remember the decisions that went into it. But I think probably to have started with the news which is the was the activism in Jordan would have been for our readers at least I'm sure in Jordan that was the news. But in fact it was the news so there was a fair amount of news about it at the time. But our readers would have just been Jordanian women or Jordanians in general are rising up and acting and advocating against what thing? it wasn't something wasn't an idea that was. Has. That phenomenon would have been well understood by Time's readers. What is an honor killing? What are they? What are they? What are they organizing against? So I think that would have that would have dictated the order in which those ideas were set out.

[00:15:54] **John O'Neil** Okay. So sometimes making things clear is a matter of structure as well as as well as the specific words. That's an interesting way you set that up. So now you are not a reporter, you're not a foreign correspondent. You're an editor who.

[00:16:12] **Lisa Beyer** Right.

[00:16:13] **John O'Neil** Sits next to me when we're both in the office. And so we work on quick takes, which are standalone explainer pages. And next week we're going to be talking about standalone rules. But let's just take a minute to talk in general about, you know, it's the job of an editor to be, you know, the dissatisfied one when they read the copy and to look for holes in articles or look for things that need explaining. So just like Twitter is like, how does it seem different in the editor hat on rather than the reporter hat? And what do you think is like, from that perspective, how do you see the some of the problems?

[00:16:58] **Lisa Beyer** Well, I guess I would say that when I'm editing, I mean, as an editor, I do all kinds of things, you know? I mean, I'm looking for all kinds of things. I'm looking... You know we're talking about editing, we're talking about..as an editor, where am I looking for explanatory issues with where. There needs to be an explanation? Yes. And I think that I think that I have to think about this question for a minute, but did come to me that there are certain things that jumped out at me.

[00:17:31] And I have to ask myself, is this a moment where there needs to be an explanation? And so those are notably proper nouns. So is this an individual that who

needs some description? Do we need to say who Elon Musk is or not? In the context of this story, do we need to say, well, that that's a good good of an example. And even if it's even if it's Joe Biden and we have his title. Is there something is there something more about Joe Biden that we need to know in the context of this story for its proper name? So that's a person I mean, it could be a person, could be an organization.

[00:18:18] And, you know, do we need to spell out? I mean, if it's something that's the United Nations. We don't need to explain what the United Nations is, but probably we do need to explain what is that? What is that organization? What does it do? Places often you'll see in copy references for example, if you look at the war in the Ukraine, you'll see references to cities or just proper nouns that are obviously places. But you don't realize that a city is that a province, is that a region? And what is its relevance? What is it near? Is it a big place? Is it an industrial center? Is it a center of fighting? You don't know. You might not know. You're not likely to know unless it's really been in the news. And it's really. Is it a port city? Is it a center of a strategic struggle for some reason?

[00:19:19] **John O'Neil** Kherson is a city in a province, I think. And I think that's trying to read those stories and not knowing which one is being referred to.

[00:19:29] **Lisa Beyer** Right. So those are proper nouns terms that are not in ordinary English, I guess just with this, especially jargon. And here's where reporters will sometimes use the terminology of their that their sources use. You will find this particularly in well, you find it in actually in all kinds of coverage, health coverage, markets coverage, science coverage, funding foreign affairs coverage as well. You'll see markets reporter say things like the market expects such and such to happen. What does that mean? How does a market expect something? That kind, that kind of thing.

[00:20:27] **John O'Neil** You were the editor on most of our COVID coverage for a quicktakes on just things like email. You know, the reporters just get so used to hearing it and throwing it in and it's like, well, it's probably something we need to explain some point.

[00:20:45] **Lisa Beyer** Right, right, right. So that would literally be a scientific term. But there will also be like uses of the English language, which are not typical to an ordinary layperson. So scientists might, for example, talk about bending the curve or bending the slope, for example. We all got that explained to us, obviously. But you'll see that in in news copy that the way that people inside of an inside of a field will speak and that needs to be translated to the ordinary reader. And then I guess finally, I would make the point that you don't want to ever have in any journalistic article, you don't want the text to raise a question that you don't answer in the text. So, for example, if you if the story says china is the world's second largest producer of widgets, that makes the reader wonder whose what country produces more. And that's a very easy fix you know, I just think, you know, apart from Hungary you know, China is the world's largest producer, so.

[00:22:15] **John O'Neil** Well, we were talking before we got on about another story. It's actually on the website today where there's there are different bits and pieces, but you're still left with questions that aren't answered.

[00:22:31] **Lisa Beyer** Yeah. So let's talk about that let's let's talk about that story. So this is a story about let me just find it. This is a new story about Germany opening its first liquefied natural gas vessel. And the story tells you that this is going to help Germany...celebrated a bit because it's going to help germany reduce its dependance on Russian gas.

[00:23:11] **Lisa Beyer** Okay. But the story never tells you the how of that. So if you know that Germany buys its gas from Russia and Russia has put that supply in question. And now Russia has what has opened up a liquefied natural gas vessel. There's nothing that would necessarily tell you.

[00:23:43] **John O'Neil** Germany has opened up.

[00:23:46] **Lisa Beyer** Yes, sorry to say incorrectly. Sorry. Okay. So if you know that. The Germany wants to be more energy independent from Russia, wants to get away from its dependance on Russia for gas. And, you know, now it's open to liquefied natural. Gas vessel and. It needs gas for that natural gas vessel. It's not necessarily going to be obvious how that gets Germany away from its dependance on Russia for gas. It's still going to need gas for the natural gas vessel. The natural gas vessel doesn't come with gas has to be supplied with gas.

[00:24:30] **Lisa Beyer** So what the story doesn't tell you. Is what's important what's important to this story, which is that germany until now has relied on Russia for gas through a pipeline which runs to Russia. And Russia has, has, has put the provision of that gas in great doubt, to say the least. And so because gas has to be, if it's going to be sent in gas form, it has to be sent through a pipeline. Germany said, well, let's not get our gas or pipeline. Anymore let's get it by boat. And to do that, you have to get it liquefied. And if you get it liquefied you can buy it from anywhere. In the world, just like oil from anywhere in the world. And that's why it's important that it's got this liquefied natural gas vessel. It's a way of importing gas from anywhere in the world. And that context isn't in the story.

[00:25:34] **John O'Neil** So creating creating the terminal and the vessels was a necessary step to be able to import from more suppliers to Russia. And it's one of the things where I'm sure the reporter thought it was being explained and it's in there, if you would like look really hard and think about it. But to just stay, here's why this is important. Here's a problem, and here is why this is being seen as a as a solution.

[00:26:12] **Lisa Beyer** And to the reporter, maybe, I mean, I don't know, maybe it was just really obvious to the reporter because I'm sure this reporter covers these gas issues all night and day. But to a reader, unless the reader is really, really familiar with the gas industry. I'm pretty familiar with this and it took me a minute to unpack it, to explain it. I mean, I understand it, but it's not super easy to explain, so it's not super easy to understand. It just needed that I think it needed that connective tissue.

[00:26:48] **John O'Neil** All right. So this is also getting to your point of like not raising questions that aren't answered, even if the bits and pieces of the answer are scattered around. It's nice to just answer them.

[00:27:03] **Lisa Beyer** Yeah. Just lay it out.

[00:27:05] **John O'Neil** As laid out.

[00:27:06] **Lisa Beyer** Lay it out in a logical fashion.

[00:27:11] **John O'Neil** Well, that's great. And I thank you for your time and I'm looking forward to next time we can talk about how we would deal with some of these questions if we were doing them a quicktake, if we were doing them in a standalone piece, rather than

using our shoehorn to squeeze things in here and there in news stories being written, tightly and on deadline because you certainly knew a Time magazine about writing things tight.

[00:27:41] **Lisa Beyer** Oh, yeah. Somebody once said that writing for Time magazine was like the art of writing on top of a cake. You only had this much space and it had to be just so.

[00:27:53] **John O'Neil** You can get happy or birthday. Which one are you?

[00:27:56] **Lisa Beyer** Yeah. Or John. So. All right. Well, great. I look forward to talking to you again. And thanks so much for your time. You bet. Okay. Happy to join.