

Interview With S. Mitra Kalita | Module 1

[00:00:12] **John O'Neill** Welcome back to Explain This and we're going to be talking today with Mitra Kalita, a news entrepreneur, writer and editor with a wide range of experience around the globe. She's most recently the co-founder and CEO of URL Media, a network of Black and Brown community news outlets that share content and revenue. She had previously been senior vice president and CNN Digital, and it also worked at the Wall Street Journal, the Los Angeles Times and the online news site Quartz, among many, many other places, including Mint, a business paper in New Delhi where she was a founding editor. So welcome and thank you for joining us.

[00:00:56] **Mitra Kalita** Thank you for having me.

[00:00:59] **John O'Neill** So in this module we're talking a bunch about understanding our audience to be able to understand what we need to explain to the audience. And looking over the career path I just sketched out of New Delhi, really big legacy places, online places and the digital side of a legacy place. So as you bounced from one place to another, I'm not going to ask you what you thought the audience was in each of those, but did you come up with a method for trying to figure out who you were writing and editing for?

[00:01:38] **Mitra Kalita** Yeah, it's a great question. So I usually prefer the term audiences plural for everywhere I worked just to acknowledge that, especially in digital media that the opportunity to have many audiences on pieces of work is kind of a part of digital strategy, has to be a part of digital strategy. I use three organizing questions to get at this question of audience, and I really devised this at CNN, which, as you know, and I think most of the world knows, like CNN is the largest news organization on the planet. And yet the challenge of writing for everybody is that it can feel like you're writing for nobody. Meaning, by trying to catch this big sweep of the planet, you start to get into the, well, I'm not that person or this doesn't speak to me. And and so that's the challenge. And so one framework I devised that CNN but that has kind of worked for a lot of like including my news outlets now Epicenter, which is much smaller than CNN, but has also worked for other journalists.

[00:02:59] There are three questions that I ask people when they pitch an idea. So as a journalist, you're going to have an idea, you're going to go to your editor and say, I want to write about this. And so my moment is to start inserting audience at that inception of an idea versus at the end of the process. So the three questions I would ask are, what's the story? Who is it for? And how will you find them? And it's pretty simple, right? But in the process of answering those questions, it forces the writer, the producer, and the depending on whether you're creating a 700 word article or a two minute video piece or even a TikTok, to basically distill what's the story? What am I trying to say? Who's it for? Who's the intended audience here? And how will I find them? Is the piece that I actually feel like journalists never ask in a newsroom. And yet it's so important because everything including the success of your story and the potential impact of your story is distribution. Right. And we're in the moment where you might say, well, it's Twitter or Facebook, YouTube, like you might say, it's everything. But especially in these moments of newsrooms being more resource strapped, like it might not be possible that it's going to be on everything. So I think that question of how we find the intended audience is an important framework.

[00:04:35] **John O'Neill** That's really interesting because like in the old days, it's like, how would I find my audience? It would be on their doorstep. And I just I write the article, it goes in the paper, the paper gets put out. But now it's so much more complex. And it is, who you're going to explain something to depends on who is going to be able to get it. And who is able to get it depends on how you put it out, how you promote it. So it's circular and obviously a better thing to think about beforehand. Yeah, that's a really good point. So and to just draw a contrast between like if you were to pick out Quartz or Mint versus CNN, places that were not the globe. When you're dealing with something where your your publication, your outlet defines the audience somewhat more narrowly than CNN International does. So, how does your sense of the audience then feedback into what you're going to do as a reporter or as an editor tell the reporter or producer to do?

[00:05:51] **Mitra Kalita** So. It's probably in a few ways. Some of it is your own education, reporting, research into a story. So I think one challenge with geography, so let's say the examples you used of Mint, right? When I was in India, I moved to India from the US. And so a lot of questions I'd ask about porters, they would say, "everybody already knows this." That's common. That's pretty common.

[00:06:24] And yet when you're a business journalist, especially in a market like India, which is an emerging economy. Meaning there's a lot of people that are reading business journalism as aspirational. They're hoping to get a white collar job or hoping to get a promotion or hoping to figure out how to buy a second home or invest in the stock market. Right. So for me, I would have to sometimes say, well, if everybody knows this, how do we reach both audiences, meaning not alienate an audience that's in the know but also create entry points to new audiences. And so for me entry points of content and this is why distribution is so important. The entry points of content are not often in the story. It might be the headline, it may be the photo, it might be addressing your audience. So it might be a section of a story saying if you've never bought a home before.

[00:07:26] So the word you as a journalist becomes really important, because in the same way, like who's the story for? If you use the word you, which is really kind of rare in the journalism of the old school. You don't use the first person you don't use the second person. Everything is omniscient narrator. But if you use the word you, sometimes it says, well, who's the you? And it forces you to say, if you've never bought a home before or if your child is entering kindergarten for the first time. So it starts to define who your content is for. I think headlines can kind of work in the same way. The other thing is that I think we need to know that people will read more than one story if a subject interest. And so there's a culture of linking to other things on the Internet, which I love because it acknowledges you're not just going to get a story on your doorstep and only read one newspaper today. If you are let's say you're a mom whose kids are about to go to kindergarten, and you were trying to read up on a school. My guess is you're going to read everything on that school versus just read one story on that school. And I think one part of what you're asking is for us to actually acknowledge that there is a lot out there and either nod to it or further explain or strip it down.

[00:08:58] **John O'Neill** So the first thing you talked about, the points of entry is acknowledging that there are or is more than one audience, and you're going to give them different ways to get into and find the information. And the second one is it our job is to explain is to help you find information as well as tell you information. And we can do that by giving you points of entry points of exit.

[00:09:29] **Mitra Kalita** And, you know, one word that's used a lot in newsletter land, which, you know, is kind of what I inhabit now with epicenter is scannable. So if you think about how traditional newspaper text goes, it's blocks of text which can be hard to read and alienating. And what I'm always saying is like, you know, bullet points or your friend. Like kind of either hyphens or dashes or something that just breaks it up. And some people think of that as overly simplistic and like, will affect the beauty of the work. And I'm like, but why wouldn't you want to be easier? Why wouldn't you want to make your copy easier for someone to navigate?

[00:10:13] **John O'Neill** Well, it's interesting because mobile, by making the screen so small and the imposes it imposing a whole new set of disciplines because it's like if you just have a 300 word paragraph that is just an endless block of text on a phone, no one's going to read it. So it's forcing people to build some scaffolding notes or drawings and things. And in our quick takes we have a menu you're mentioning the links. We have the last thing in every explainer page. So we call the reference shelf, we say here are four or five or six other things to read and they're as happy as if they're not. Bloomberg News stories is if they are because we just it gets across the message. We're here for the reader. We're not here just for ourself.

[00:11:16] And now from going from some sort of global view and CNN to your URL media, which is a local or even hyperlocal. I guess before we talk a little bit about what that does to the audience in relation to it. Could you explain to the students what your URL media is?

[00:11:38] **Mitra Kalita** Sure. So URL media, URL stands for uplift, respect and love. And we're a network of I think we've just crossed 17 high performing community media outlets around the country. And we basically operate as a network that shares revenue and content revenue in terms of advertising. So URL can sell and upsell in some cases the network to different brands that are seeking to reach those audiences. And then the second part of content sharing is if you run a story and you're a member of the URL media network, you have access to other people's stories that they're running on, let's say the census or the student loan forgiveness program or, you know, the mayor of New York City and his plan to eradicate homelessness. Right. And so in as you might imagine, in some of these smaller newsrooms, the ability to tap into content really makes a big difference because it allows you to feel bigger than you are. It also allows you to potentially reach new audiences. If you have a story that feels like it shouldn't just be limited to, for example, the people who read your newsletter in Queens. So Epicenter is a member of the URL Media Network and we've been able to leverage it to great effect around coverage of politics. We've been able to run some live streams and debates with city council candidates. And then we've also been able to talk about our stories on television and radio and other platforms. So it gets a little bit more mileage and attention to those stories.

[00:13:21] **John O'Neill** And, you know, setting out to reach audiences that groups that are neglected or marginalized or talked about play a prominent role in the narrative from major media.

[00:13:36] **Mitra Kalita** Yep. So it's because they're community media outlets. Absolutely. They would be considered underrepresented.

[00:13:42] **John O'Neill** So when you were talking to them, it seems like if they're not used to, if you're giving him information, they wouldn't get otherwise, but they also represent

areas of information. And, you know, what is it? What is it like to be in a relationship with an audience and then to learn that much from as well as inform?

[00:14:15] **Mitra Kalita** Yeah, I would argue we constantly need to be learning from our audiences. And so one of the ways that I think this network is different than my decades in mainstream media is that this question of where do these audiences need is at the forefront of every journalist in the network. And so this belief in serving communities is not just serving communities with information. It's a two way conversation on what do you need?

[00:14:44] So I'll give you an example. Last year, TBN 24, which is a Bangladeshi livestreaming channel before the tax deadline, did a number of kind of almost like office hours with an accountant who speaks in Bengali and he was able to answer people's questions around filing taxes. And that's just like a good service, right? It's like and I think a lot of outlets like The Wall Street Journal tries to do that before taxes are due and maybe some changes or updates. There's always the how to pieces. The two way listening though that occurs is you start to glean trends from. These callers who might say, Oh, you know, I launched a small business in the pandemic, I availed of this credit and this program. How do I you know, there's like questions around that stuff. So you start to come up with content that then can inform other things you're going to do. Someone like me, that becomes really instructive both in, you know, the gift of being able to listen to communities. Because when you do print or text based work, because like a lot of Epicenter is you're out in the community, but it's not necessarily opening your phone lines in a way that is like to mass. Right. And so I think.

[00:16:14] I think one just real basic level of URL and the benefit of having a network like that is the ability to listen and open yourselves up to audiences, which I really didn't feel a lot of that in the mainstream. You have like letters to the editor, but that's usually to file a complaint or a grievance to disagree with something It's not to direct media outlets on, this is the thing I need right now. Right. And I think that's simple, but oddly revolutionary. The other piece I would say is kind of. When you learn about other communities, mainstream media tends to approach things from a place of difference. And so what do I mean by that? If you're an overseas correspondent and you open up The New York Times or The Wall Street Journal or, you know, like you'll see the lead of a story will often say, you know, on a dusty road in like insert the city and like places immediately we're painting as different. And what does that do? Maybe it signals to your mainstream readers, like, I went somewhere and it's different. But I would argue it also alienates the people who are from that place where it's not so different. Right? And so I think there's an operating from a place of sameness. So I don't really look at the other partners from a perspective of... I do look at it from what do I need to learn but I also look for, kind of to the point of points of entry and copy stories. I really do look for points of entry among communities where you might say, Oh. You know, the Native American population has really has really found unique ways to mourn how many people they've lost to COVID-19. Is there something we in the Epicenter of the Epicenter here in Queens could be learning from? So I really do approach it from that perspective. I would say, it's again, like you might hear something opportunistic in how I'm framing it, but I do think we're trying to advocate on behalf of our audiences to get access to things to make their lives better.

[00:18:36] **John O'Neill** Well, we're going to look at two of the pieces that you sent to me the other day. And we'll start with the one from from CNN you did. And I think that the theme here is a... If you are trying to learn, if you are trying to have something explained to

you so you can then explain it to the audience. So let me end my clumsy zooming at the screen sharing going.

[00:19:08] So this is a piece you did as an interview about the white nationalist, former white nationalist, and it's much more personal. And beginning with this opening note here where you said we reached out to him to better understand how their world might affect mine. And I think the idea that I did reporting because I wanted to understand something better is implicit in every story. But to say, I didn't understand this. I'm puzzled about it and it matters to me. And so here's what I did about it, I think sets it up for. So what was your, how did you find this working for you as a...

[00:20:11] **Mitra Kalita** And that's a good question. So this idea came about, as you might imagine, in the summer of 2017, which is, of course, the summer of the Charlottesville massacre. I mean, there was with a car and people were killed. I mean, the car was a weapon.

[00:20:38] And so as you might imagine, that August, there were a lot of stories about the roots of white nationalism. Right. And I think some of this was exactly what we're talking about, a desire to explain a community and how it came to be. So it was kind of historic, but also it felt very distant. And that's not by accident. Right. The nature of media, I we just talked about this first person, second person, third person, omniscient narrator removed from the story.

[00:21:09] And the challenge is, if you were in August of 2017 and you look the way I do. And you have kids who look the way I do and are like riding the subway themselves and kind of out and about in the world. You worry about different things than the roots of white nationalism. You actually worry about the present day of white nationalism. Right. And I think sometimes when a story like that presents itself a current event, someone was just killed in an act of white nationalism. Our instinct for explanatory journalism is to go backward into the roots of something. And I would argue we actually need to get more to the here and now, because the service journalism piece is literally what I set out to do here, which is, 'wait what's happening right now' and turning the lens very personally. Am I safe? Are my children safe? And not just in this theoretical like, yeah, it's out there, good luck to you away which I think is what a lot of media does. Something is bad. Good luck to all of you. Right.

[00:22:30] So I think there's one question I asked here, which was like, look, if you're sitting on the plane next to me and you're a white nationalist, A, would you talk to me? And B, what can I do? Because inevitably we're in a moment where worlds are colliding. Right. And so for a lot of and I think digital has been kind of... Not a distraction, but digital has not been advantageous in this one regard, where we kind of insert the same distance of the polarized landscape of writing about into our coverage. When the reality of going about your day to day life is that you can't be that polarized. You can't be like, okay, Delta Airlines only seat me next to people who are going to be friendly to me. Like it just doesn't work that way. And so I kind of set out to say, well, what is what is that like? Is there anything we can do to change this right now? And the result maybe was kind of not your typical story about white nationalism, meaning it takes on a very accessible tone because suddenly it's like, oh, white nationalists have to send their kids to school and fly and whatever, but it's still not. You know, when The New York Times does that story, sometimes people worry that it's with a lens of being sympathetic to them. I don't think this was sympathetic. I think it was really with this forefronting of, like, I'm kind of scared out of my mind. Right. And I think acknowledging that is okay. I also think it does two things. This

is a classic case where you can have multiple audiences on one piece of content, because I know that other mothers and other people of color are having the same reaction as I am. And so I know they're going to read this piece because I answered questions I really had. The second, I think, is that I think people who were reading those pieces about white nationalism and its roots are also reading this piece, because as far as I saw on the Internet, there really wasn't anything else like this out there. And that almost like pragmatic aspect of. Of the coverage made it more valuable.

[00:24:50] **John O'Neill** Oh, that's a good point. That's a really interesting point, because some of what you're talking about is, you know, we all live in a world as well as write about a world and in all ways of thinking, these are two different experiences. But I think we learn from we learn as journalists, from what we learned in our time during the last part of our life. And let's move to the epicenter piece, because, sure, this is this is a real epitome of this. Let me tell our audience that Epicenter is a total example of doing something practical to deal with where you live and what's going on in your life. Mitra lives in Jackson Heights and Queens, and that part of Queens was the most strongly affected part of New York City when New York City was the most strongly affected part of the world in the early part of the COVID pandemic. And the Epicenter is how I got to know Mitra, because along with putting out a newsletter of what do we need to know to get through this? Then later on in the pandemic, when the vaccines came out, that the most pressing bit of information and, you know, the greatest need for information around the country was like, how do I get a vaccine? Which was just mind bogglingly hard and complex to do. And why don't you just summarize what Epicenter did that led to this piece?

[00:26:38] **Mitra Kalita** Sure. So we we had been in existence for about six months as the vaccines were rolled out to the public in January of 2021. And because we had done a lot of work with small businesses, including restaurants in Jackson Heights, the area that John just spoke about is one of the communities that is home to more restaurant workers than any other part of New York City. And so we started getting calls from some of these restaurants, we profiled saying our workers qualify, but we don't know how to get them vaccines. And so I said, okay, I can help you. And because partly because of my background in digital media, I guess, like, maybe I have like fast fingers on the Internet, I still don't know why I'm good at booking a vaccine. But it's hard, as you said, it's hard to navigate. And a lot of the, a lot of the process of getting a vaccine required and not just the ability to navigate the Internet, but being really comfortable on the Internet. Right. And so I started to just do this as we were getting phone calls and queries and then word of mouth, as you might imagine in our communities, is very strong. And soon I was getting Excel spreadsheets of entire restaurant staffs to book them for vaccines. And then it started to be like quietly putting out the word like, oh, people are asking us for this. I have like 30 people to book. Can anyone help? And it just was like asking people who were in our network, so our interns, the newsletter production editor, my daughter, you know, like just random neighbor that said, she was good at this.

[00:28:19] And then we wrote about it, and the first time we wrote about it was before this story was when we had helped 64 people get their vaccines. And then by the time we put that out, it sort of put out a word to both audiences and others who might be good at booking vaccine. So again, multiple audiences for one piece of content. One, you need a vaccine, here's an organization that can help you too. Are you good at helping others book things online? This is an organization that can use your help, right? And so we started getting queries. People started to tweet Epicenter is helping people get vaccines. And I think one of the pieces that I'm talking about in terms of ongoing engagement with an audience resulted in this piece of all the pieces we wrote. We wrote about maybe about 20

plus stories around vaccine registration. This is the one that went kind of viral, right? The one that, you know, Nate Silver from FiveThirtyEight tweeted, I think The New York Times linked to this. It got us on WNYC and we ended up being on Brian Lehrer 18 times. WNYC is the NPR affiliate here in New York City. But this piece aimed for explanation, but also said, 'how and why don't we break down different aspects of registering into trends? We're seeing how you can help?' And taking it beyond that space that I was just in. We serve a community. We clearly serve a community. They're seeking us out, They're calling us, they're emailing us. But sometimes, stories don't serve a community. Right. Actions serve a community like the process of helping somebody get their vaccine. However, this format of writing it in this way, I knew would help us get politicians, public policy makers and other journalists to understand what that ground reality and what our audiences were telling us they need looked like. And so in some cases, I think it is okay for content like this to be targeting politicians, journalists, the people who can move and create action to address what's happening on the ground. And I think a lot of epicenter. Is the opposite of how traditional media work, because traditional media writes a story exposing wrongdoing and you wait for someone to do something about it. I feel like right now we listen to an audience. We try to help you navigate services often digitally or through the power of information. And along the way, we're chronicling what's happening with hopes that we can improve processes throughout. And so I think significantly, this was not our only story on vaccine equity. It was not our first it was not our last, but it was the one that performed best because it was the most zoomed out, kind of intentionally exhaustive look at what does it look like out there right now?

[00:31:39] **John O'Neill** You know that. So you're learning from a community and then being a bridge to other communities? Oh, I think there is a lot of overlap between explanatory journalism and solutions journalism and in both of them involve... there's something you said in our conversation the other day? It's a transformation as a journalist as well as helping to transform a community.

[00:32:09] **Mitra Kalita** That's right. Yeah, absolutely. And I think the other piece of it that I think a lot of people will say to me 'your writing is just so simple.' Right. And John, you probably know this having edited me. First of all, that's not easy because you really have to know what's happening in order to extract something simple to be able to say what's happening on the ground. You have to really know what's happening on the ground. The other piece is that... I have struggled for decades with how to tell some of these stories and have ended up in a place where the simplest declarative, like this is the way it is and ends up being the solution. And to the extent that that's freeing for anybody, I just want to repeat it. The simplest sentence of this is what it looks like or, you know, can be the most freeing thing as a journalist.

[00:33:14] **John O'Neill** I mean, this gets back to the so traditional description of the dusty road in some far off places. You don't need to give me an anecdotal lead that shows your novelistic ability. Tell me what's there. Tell me what you've learned and tell me through that, tell me how it's changed you. by telling me what you've seen. So this actually brings me back to what's going to be my final question coming out of these two stories is that, what would you tell your earlier self? You know, and when you work toward mainstream journalism of what's what you might do differently and by extension, what you might tell our students here as we go through what this process and these experiences taught you about what you can do differently to explain the world to...

[00:34:11] **Mitra Kalita** Great question. I think that idea of kind of. How much we how much time we spend on writing matters in a lot of ways, because you have to learn the

formulas in order to break the formulas, Right? And so for me, I don't think any of that time was wasted. I think I had to learn the structure of a news story and. Almost like go through the mistakes in order to get to this place where I could be freed from them. That being said, I do think I spent countless hours trying to craft the lead of a story just right before I could move on, and I kind of think that's a lot of waste of time. And so anything you can do to kind of just move copy forward, it's time that you get back. Right. And I just again, like I didn't really know that until I hit this moment where I really just because I have so much going on right now, I just have to get it out and make sure it's right, of course, but also move on to the next thing. And so that process of sometimes being done is better than being perfect feels like a pretty important lesson.

[00:35:28] I think the second piece is this need to listen to communities and how do you create forums that reporters enter where it's not a community meeting and it's not like a formal policy or process or something that is the reason that you're there. I think making reporters be in more places with almost no reason to be there than listen is such an important part of our jobs. But it's one of the hardest part of our jobs, A, because of the time it takes to do that, right. B It's also very awkward for people to be like, 'Well, what do you need from me?' And they're going to ask, What do you need from me? And you have to come up with questions. You can't really fake this part of being interested in people's lives to gauge what are you interested in and how can I help in that kind of process, that equation? I don't think that's very comfortable to a lot of journalists, but it's a really important skill to kind of go through life with the lens of a journalist, but not necessarily the job of a journalist. It requires being much more humane. It requires being much more open. And also it requires seeing the world almost like a new every single day, because you have to be open to those opportunities and stories and listening when they happen. And so I just wish that I had done perhaps a little bit more of that. Because so much of my career felt like it was trying to get to the next thing versus really absorbing the environment around me to capture it somehow.

[00:37:15] **John O'Neill** You know, it's a it's a truism and something we're going to talk a lot about in this course. But there's no such thing as a dumb question when you're trying to learn and there is no such thing as an awkward question either. It also means there's no such thing as a dumb thing to tell people. You can tell it in a dumb way, but like here in this story, isn't it? It's hard to get a day off. Yeah, Yeah, it's just a fact. And sometimes telling people simple things and noticing simple things or learning from your audience about simple things just is as good as anything better than anything fancy.

[00:37:58] **Mitra Kalita** Yeah, absolutely.

[00:38:00] **John O'Neill** Oh, awesome. This has been great. Thank you, John. It's tough to get back to, but I really appreciate your time.

[00:38:08] **Mitra Kalita** I'm happy to do this. Thank you for letting me talk about this stuff.

[00:38:12] **John O'Neill** Okay.

[00:38:14] **Mitra Kalita** All right.

[00:38:14] **John O'Neill** You take care.

[00:38:16] **Mitra Kalita** Take care.