

Interview with Lisa Beyer | Module 3

[00:00:12] **John O'Neil** Hi. Welcome back for module three of our course on explanatory journalism, you'll remember our guest for module two, my colleague on the Quicktake team of Bloomberg News, Lisa Beyer. Lisa does a lot of the outreach and training within our newsroom about the Quicktake pages, and she's going to share her presentation as well as discuss some of the broader issues that relate to doing explanatory journalism through separate articles or standalone pages. Lisa, welcome back.

[00:00:42] **Lisa Beyer** Thanks. Thanks for having me.

[00:00:44] **John O'Neil** Well, thank you so much for your time. Last week, we talked with you about putting explanatory material within standard news articles. In this module, we're looking at ways we can go beyond what can fit into a regular news story. So Lisa is going to share her screen. So the big picture is that standalone explainers can help readers by going deeper and news stories can and can help a newsroom by adding depth to the overall news package. But we've also found that there's another benefit over time to doing them, because issues that need to be explained in the context of one news event can come up time and again. And that means explainer pages can become a continuing resource. At least that's what we found doing Quicktakes. So maybe let's start with you laying out some of the basics about what Quicktakes are.

[00:01:42] **Lisa Beyer** Sure. So Quicktakes explainers is that we use at Bloomberg are our standalone pieces. They're written in a way that they can be read without the context of a news story. They're most often written in Q&A form, although sometimes we do them in other ways, will organize them, for example, by subject area. The goal is to add depth and context to the news. We're not breaking news. We're not telling the reader what's the latest thing on this subject. We're giving them sort of the underpinnings of the news. How did we get here? How do you understand if the news story is the who, the what and when, this is the how and why often and the way that we happen to do it in the Bloomberg newsroom is that this is a collaboration between the subject area team that's covering this news and a team of Quicktake editors who are basically experts in explaining things without necessarily being on the front lines, covering those news stories.

[00:02:45] **John O'Neil** So would you just walk us through some of the explanation, give that to Bloomberg reporters about Quicktakes?

[00:02:52] **Lisa Beyer** Sure. So this is a slide that just shows a number of topics that come up in the news and readers will be familiar with lots of of these subjects and some readers will be very familiar. They'll understand very well for one reason or another, because it's in their interest or they're just curious about it. A lot of these subjects, but not necessarily all of them. And these days we're inundated with a lot of information, and especially Bloomberg's readers, for example, because they've got to know they've got to act on information in order to make financial decisions. They need to know a lot about a lot of things, and that's a very hard thing to do.

[00:03:37] **John O'Neil** We have a saying on a team of like everybody is a specialist in one thing and a generalist in everything else.

[00:03:44] **Lisa Beyer** Right. So, I mean, it just is just an average, you know, any average news consumer, I think, often feels that they're they're sort of swimming to stay, not necessarily up to date with the most recent information, but just to have some fluidity and

some some comprehension of what's going on in the world. So this is this is where our explainers come in. And to give readers a kind of a grasp of of the basics of what's happening in the world. So when we ask our reporters to come up with ideas for Quicktakes or explainers, we ask them to think of a subject in the news that they wish that they understood better or something that they do understand very well because they're reporting on it constantly, but they're often asked to explain. And this often gets to kind of the theme and we talk about it on the team. What's the thing that needs explaining?

[00:04:45] **Lisa Beyer** So there we found over time that there are basically three categories of things that make good news, explainers. One is words. And in terms of the news, I've given a few examples here. These are not the most recent examples. So this slide show was made a while ago, but they're terms that come up sometimes are new terms that have never been heard before. Sometimes there are old terms that have been that are relevant again in the news, but suddenly they're there in the headlines. People are talking about them. They're it's terminology. It's jargon that needs to be explained to the reader.

[00:05:26] A second example are what we call sagas. So these are stories that develop in dribs and drabs. And if you're particularly interested in the story, you're following it. But if you missed the first part of the story or the middle part of the story, it's very difficult sometimes to enter in the middle. And we find that explainers are a very good way to ensure that any reader can get up to speed on a topic. So I've given a couple of examples here, for example the origins of COVID. That was again some months ago. Concerns about vaping. Sort of gives you a way of learning how we got here and where we stand on a particular subject.

[00:06:06] And then the third category is stories that have history and context that are too complicated to be fully explored in a maine bar, which is a maine bar. Usually the purpose is to tell you what's the most recent thing that's happened on this story. So we have explainers, for example, on the roots of the conflict of the war in Ukraine, tensions over Taiwan, US-Saudi ties. The news story will often give you a little bit, maybe a paragraph that tells you the history and the context, but the explainer is meant to really, fully flesh that out.

[00:06:46] So here are a few ideas of the best practices of things to do before you start writing an explainer. I think the first and maybe the most important thing is to read it. I mean, if you're a reporter who's been covering a subject for a very long time, maybe you don't need to do this. But I think in most cases, reporters will find that they probably don't know and understand the subject maybe as well, to write an explainer as they do to write the daily News stories. And it's very important to sort of go beyond their working knowledge of the subject when they want to sit down and explain it. We think of our explainers as authoritative, going beyond being accurate. That is to say that we want the explainer to be the one thing that somebody could read that would be the closest to the truth about the subject. It's not just one source telling saying, this is what I think. It's really a condensation of all of the wisdom of a particular subject.

[00:07:51] **Lisa Beyer** And so it's very important to read around, to read a variety of sources to read. You can sort of almost everything that's been written about the subject. You read other what other journalists have said. I think to go beyond secondary sources, that is other journalists or people commenting on the subject to read the authoritative the primary source. So if you're writing about, for example, a scientific subject, you go to the actual scientific studies. If you're reading about what Israel's constitution says, then and

then Google to look up what the Constitution says. If it's, you know, you can often find government reports or or white papers and and really thoroughly researched the story and, you know, fill your mind up and fill your notebook up and fill your your notes up with as much good, good material as you can before you sit down to try to then tell the reader which one thing you want to try to define, the focus of the angle.

[00:08:55] **Lisa Beyer** You know, you've got big and now you've got to get smaller. What is it that you're trying to explain? And you don't want to explain everything you want to do because then it's often very helpful here to draft a headline so that you would, as with any story so that you're telling yourself. What's my mission here? What is it? I'm trying to tell the reader. And then is every high school English teacher will tell you best practices to write an outline. One of the questions you're going to have to ask yourself and answer is, do you start with the news and then go to the background? Or do you start with the background and go to the news? There's no simple answer to that. The way that we do it on our team is that usually we start with the background, and that's largely because we want to recycle these pieces. And if we start with the news when you want to use them again for injecting into a story a week later or two weeks later, they're out of date.

[00:09:50] **Lisa Beyer** And then the final point is what's the know? What is the key thing that you want to explain? And you want to be sure you understand it before you try to explain it to somebody else, because when it's unclear, when an explanation is unclear in a story to end with, the author of the story didn't understand it herself. So be sure you've got it.

[00:10:14] **John O'Neil** And sometimes we've talked about this a little bit in other sections, making sure you understand the key point. Then we'll change what you say about other parts of it. So it's, you know, you've got to climb to the top of the mountain to be able to see the valley below and all the surrounding countryside.

[00:10:34] **Lisa Beyer** Right. So this next slide is a is a is a how-to how to do explainers as we do them in the Bloomberg newsroom. I have to say, we look at explainers all the time that other outlets say The Guardian, lots of other news outlets do, and we all tend to do them more or less the same way. So I think that these are pretty relevant points. You know, you start with the headline how or why or what headline are often good ways to start an explainer headline. It tells the reader, this isn't a new story. This isn't going to tell you the latest. It's going to, again, give you this sort of a structure for understanding the news. A concise intro is the way to go. We don't use anecdotal or cute intros for an explainer. You want to get right to the point and tell the viewer what your mission is. 5 to 7 questions is how we do it. We try to keep them pretty brief. There are other outlets that do explainers, the BBC sometimes has explainers that...

[00:11:37] **John O'Neil** Are thousands and thousands of words.

[00:11:40] **Lisa Beyer** Yeah, and they're very useful. Just not the way to, you know, just not the way that we do it. We try to use charts. Charts are very explanatory and we happen to end with something we call a reference shelf, which is 3 to 6 bulleted items of generally longer reads in case readers want, you know, to nourish their understanding further. It's just a little plus that we provide to more best practices. Obviously, isn't tough to focus on the thing that's hardest for readers to understand. It's our practice to attribute sparingly. This, again, is what are our explainers? And I think it's players in general are meant to be authoritative and not call up one source and ask the source what the source thinks and then quote The source you're meant to be the authority. Do as as as the author

of the explainer are meant to be the authority. And you can use links and hyperlinks to documents and other stories instead of doing a lot of according to same point about the quotes. Again, you should be, I think, paraphrasing what's the what's a body of wisdom on the subject and not just saying one person says this and another person says that we make an exception for quotes that are integral to the narrative, quote, as part of understanding the story that we put it in there. And we always remind our reporters to tout their quicktakes. In other words, it takes put the explainers into the news stories that are related to that same subject so that you give you know, you give the reader the context that they need for understanding those stories.

[00:13:27] **John O'Neil** Just like within the quicktakes, we use links to add more, more context. People in the news story can use a link to the quicktake to, you know, telescope, all our work into into that spot. So I think it might be helpful to talk about one particular page and sort of like where did it come from and what was the purpose of walk us through that process?

[00:13:53] **Lisa Beyer** Sure. So a quick date that we first did in July and then it was updated in November, which you can see here is a one on the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia. So this is a story that has been very much in the news for years, really. But it was particular, as was particularly in the news in the later part of last year because of rising oil prices and us the efforts of the US president to try to wrest out of the Saudis an increase in oil production and the failure to do that. And so we thought it would be useful to to explain this very odd relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia. These are two countries that are very, very different, but have been very close allies and their relationship has been kind of hot and cold and hot and cold and hot and cold. And why and what is that? What is the basis for it and why? Why is it. Why has this alliance begun to fray? So I turn to a reporter who is Marlowe, who was in a position to write about the subject with some authority is. An outline for the piece and starts with an introduction, which maybe will give people a moment just to just to read. So people can see that this is not a news story. This isn't a story that tells you what's the most recent thing that's happened between the United States and Saudi Arabia. It's a description of the relationship and it lays out that something has changed in the relationship and it lays out principally what the thing is and what the ramifications, why the relationship has changed. The US listed Saudi Arabia differently, and Saudi Arabia looks at the United States differently than it has traditionally. And what the what the ramifications of that are.

[00:16:19] **John O'Neil** The single weakness I have is that I think a lot of people used to try and say everything right at the start, a really good introduction to like, here's what we're writing about, here's why it matters. And here's going to be like the angle or framework to take a look at this and then dive into it.

[00:16:40] **Lisa Beyer** Right. So these are the questions that we that we that we set up to explain this. And there were so many ways that you could have done this, but we wish we started with where does the relationship stand? Because that I mean, generally, I think people don't want to. Don't want to start with ancient history. They're not they're not coming to a new source to start with history. They want to know what's going on, where are we right now? So we start with that. And then the second question naturally led to what would Biden had done in trying to trying to repair relations with the crown prince of Saudi Arabia. And the question was, did that work? And then we get into more into the roots of why the relationship is broken down, because the United States is no longer so, doesn't depend on Saudi Arabia so much. And the Saudis don't trust the United States so much to defend them. So that's those are questions three and four. And then we get into the

deeper history, which explains why these two countries that are really an odd couple ended up being in such an alliance to begin with.

[00:17:50] **Lisa Beyer** And then the next question is really kind of a it's a way of really embracing that question talks about previous periods when there has been discord between the two. And then the final question sort of pitches the story for forward. What's the outlook? In explainers we try to avoid speculation because we think that if you're explaining something, it's really not a place to speculate. So we try not to be super speculative. But this question was meant to be a place to talk about. What are the path for the story to go? Again, we try to plant it in reality enough and not be too far off in terms of what might happen. It's not a place for opinion. We don't think explainers are a place for opinion, but we want to give the reader some sense of what the possibilities are.

[00:18:46] **John O'Neil** So in this outline, some questions are looking narrowly at like the U.S., Saudi oil, the size and scope of that relationship. Some zoom in, some zoom out to like, let's look at the last 50 years, 100 years. Let's look at some of the other kinds of disagreements. And when you're making up an outline that's sort of like. I have things I want to tell people. What's a natural order to tell it? And then, of course, as you write it, sometimes you find out, well, maybe I need to change this soon.

[00:19:22] **Lisa Beyer** Absolutely. Yeah. And then you think that then you get feedback from it better this way.

[00:19:32] **John O'Neil** So we also wanted to talk about a standalone explainer. It's not like a news story in a lot of ways, but one of it is that it's not as immediately, you know, you know, you're at a news story, it's going to be on the front page or page ten or the front of the world section on the online site or whatever. But how people find our pages. And I think explainers in general is a little different. So you chose a couple of the examples that we talked about.

[00:20:07] **Lisa Beyer** Sure. So one of the things that we do on the Bloomberg terminal, which is...

[00:20:16] **John O'Neil** Subscriber service for mostly financial, people in the world of finance.

[00:20:23] **Lisa Beyer** Thank you. Thank you, John. Yes. Is there is a way for us to program. But what we call the right rail of a related story. So you can see here a story about the nickel market and then an explainer on why the meltdown in the nickel market mattered. And this is this is really kind of for us, kind of perfection to have related stories be touted. You know, prominently, but not interrupt the flow of the story. So that's one way that it's done.

[00:21:04] **Lisa Beyer** Another way that it's done. And you'll see in the second example here, you see sort of running a running main bar where we're entering the story in the middle of the story. This is a story about how the Bank of Japan was creating turmoil in the bond market by changing its policy on interest rates. And then you'll get to a break in the story where you'll be a clickable link, where we will offer an explainer on why this matters and the reader can click that and then back that back out of it after they've read it back into the main bar. And then here you see an image of the Bloomberg website. And on the bottom right you can see a standalone quicktake. This is not a quick take that's been injected into a story is context, but something to read on its own about the case against

champagne trade. And as I said, we write our critiques so that they can be used to write our explainer so that they can be used either way. So that is how people find them. They also very often find them by searching. Obviously, search terms are very important and we write our headlines and our SEO terms with that very much in mind because people are often just trying to understand the news and they're looking for explainers.

[00:22:30] **John O'Neil** And one advantage explainers have in terms of search is because they they last for a while. It's not a set it and forget it news story that's wrapping fish the next day and can accumulate some you know search benefits but it's also that gives us the opportunity to change and evolve. Reuse some of these some of the explainers as stories turn into running stories. But is there an example you can give of like how how something rolls along changes as we see different things to explain?

[00:23:10] **Lisa Beyer** Sure, there are many, many examples of that, but probably the most relevant example of that at the moment is the is Omicron. So when news first broke about this new variant, you'll see here it was in November of 2021 and we put out an explainer and we were updating this explainer constantly, constantly, constantly. You'll see that within three days the word Omicron appears in the headlines and. You'll see how the headline evolves. This story was such a huge story, even though it broke in November. By the end of 2021, it this explainer got more hits on the Bloomberg terminal than any news story that year. It was just enormous appetite for an understanding of what was going on with this variant. So you'll see that explainer evolved as we learned more and more and more. And then as the variant itself evolves. See here in February. Now it's a Omicron and it's subvariant, BA.2, which it makes an appearance in the headline. And then by the middle of June last year, it is the Omicron Clan of virus variant. So this is a piece that I don't know, it may have set a record for the number of updates in a short period of time that we made to an explainer, because again, it was a huge appetite for understanding it and it was a story that was literally evolving.

[00:25:08] **John O'Neil** So it's like we're not writing events, we're not writing new stories, but we're also not writing encyclopedia articles which are set in stone and permanent. We are there to add depth and context to the news, and it helps to have things we've already done and then just update, which is much quicker and easier. But we have to we have to adapt as the news changes.

[00:25:34] **Lisa Beyer** And we also often find that news will happen and we will remember we'll find even a piece of an explainer. If that's relevant to the current moment. Maybe not the whole explainer, but we will cannibalize that part of it. And because we kind of have this insistence on pieces being authoritative, that's very helpful when you're pulling something out of the past and trying to use it. I mean, obviously you have to check and make sure that...The part that you're taking is still relevant and that hasn't been overtaken by events, but that very often we we find that we're able to reuse parts of old explainers because things haven't changed that much. What was relevant then is relevant again and because the other pieces of research to start with.

[00:26:30] **John O'Neil** Yeah, that's like when there was a new ouster of a president from Peru. We went back to the experiment we did when the last president was ousted. And we're able to use the history about all the presidents who have been ousted in Peru before. So, your your work before is your is your starting point for your work today. And we draw on everything the newsroom has done as well as as well as what we've done so. Okay. Well, Lisa, this was really helpful. And I we're going to, I'm sure, get into the

discussion forum this week into some of the specifics about what you talked about. And thanks for your early double dipper of a guest. So for this time and for the previous time.

[00:27:21] **Lisa Beyer** Sure. And good luck to your students.

[00:27:23] **John O'Neil** Okay. See you soon.