

What needs explaining? What are our tools? | Module 1

[00:00:12] **John O'Neil** Hi. Welcome to module one and this course on explanatory journalism. My name is John O'Neil and I'm very glad you've decided to join this group. As we look at ways to use context, background and analysis to inform your readers and engage your audience, I'm going to start sharing my screen.

[00:00:36] Explaining things is important and it isn't always easy. In this video, we're going to look at what you might call 'the context for sharing context,' the elements that we use in explaining things through journalism.

[00:00:54] We're going to discuss the concept of audience and of multiple audiences. We're going to look at how what you know shapes what you can experience and how you need to explain it. We'll talk about the desert island theory and what I call 'the arc of familiarity,' how what needs to be explained changes over the course of a news event or running story. All these factors come together in an interplay of you, your readers and the situation you're describing.

[00:01:31] Well, let me start by saying something that I think has crossed the mind of everyone who teaches an online class, especially an asynchronous one like this. Hello out there! Can anybody hear me?

[00:01:50] This also is how a lot of us journalists feel a lot of the time. We write stories. We edit stories. We hit the button to send them into the world, and then we're not entirely sure what happens next. Even though social media can bring readers, especially the angry readers, uncomfortably close, most journalism is still one-way communication. That means there's always some mystery about who's listening and what they make of what we've given them.

[00:02:26] How we fill in that blank was the subject of the first reading for this module, a paper called *The Audience in the Mind's Eye: How Journalists Imagine Their Readers*. The author, James Robinson, a professor at Columbia Journalism School, begins by stating that the idea of serving an audience is a foundational principle of journalism. At the same time, journalists may have little actual idea of who their audience is, and they resist attempts to have that defined for them, especially if that feedback is coming from audience members who are seen as having an agenda. Part of the mental body armor that we all wear as journalists is the idea that everybody has an agenda. Instead, Robinson suggests, we create a mental picture out of the things that we know and the things that we hope.

[00:03:28] Audiences that we know include our editor, our boss, and the head of the newsroom. One audience that may have a significant sway is our sources, another is our colleagues. All of those will send you signals through praise, criticism or requests for changes. Yes, this is good for our readers or no, it's not. If you work for a newsroom that has a specific focus, like a newsletter focused on the environment or something even more specific, like environmental law, those signals are likely to be even more clear. And then as a more general backdrop, our friends and family members, particularly those with whom we discuss the issues of the day, play a role in shaping our sense of who knows what. And then there are those we hope are reading our copy, people whose opinion we care about, perhaps an editor at a place we'd like to be hired. That is what Robinson calls an aspirational audience. Well, all those come together in what he calls the instinctive audience: what our gut feeling is about who we're writing for.

[00:04:46] In this week's second reading, an American Press Institute panel met to discuss a movement that's known as accountability journalism, which has a lot of overlap with explanatory journalism. It also concluded that newsrooms work best when they keep multiple audiences in mind, ranging from the political leaders in a community, to those whom it describes as 'not so highly engaged citizens.' The panel also describes how having a sense of the audience, and keeping the need to provide context useful to that audience in mind, is an important factor in the ultimate impact of the work. But the audience is only in one side of the equation. The other is you.

[00:05:37] I think we all probably know the feeling of starting out on a new beat. At first, it can feel like being dropped in a foreign country without a map: we don't know anything. So, for the first few days or weeks or month of the beat, it can be a hectic scramble to get our bearings, to learn the basics, who's who and then gradually learn more and more about why things are the way they are.

[00:06:08] Your first few months on a beat could also be a great time to do small explanatory journalism projects, because they will help you learn things you need to know to be an effective reporter. Explaining things is a great way to make sure you understand something, because it's hard to explain it if you don't.

[00:06:32] This is sort of a side note for now, and something we'll return to in module four, but it's also a great time for coming up with explanatory journalism project ideas while you still have an outsider's perspective and haven't been convinced yet that 'that's old news, everybody knows that,' which is the worst way to approach the idea of explaining things.

[00:06:58] Deciding what context and background are needed to make a subject clear depends on what we know and what we think our readers don't, but that still leaves a wide range of latitude. When I started working at the New York Times as a copy editor, I was told that the paper followed the desert island theory for context. That is, we wanted to put in all the background and explanation that someone stranded on a desert island would need to understand the news if a copy of the paper washed up in a bottle.

[00:07:35] It didn't take me long to figure out that this was just not true, not true at all. Nobody can put in that much information. And in many cases, we don't need to. Here's an example: about a year ago, I went to Brazil and so I would practice my beginners Portuguese by reading O Globo. But here's the first thing I looked at. I'm going to apologize in advance for my terrible pronunciation, but: O lavajatismo contamina a eleição, how lavajatismo contaminates the election. By reading the column, I figured out that lavajatismo had something to do with something called lava jato. And by fumbling around with Google Translate, I figured out that that meant car wash. And then a mental light bulb went on. Of course, Operation Car Wash. The corruption scandal that had dominated news in Brazil for the last seven years. It would seem as ridiculous to a Brazilian leader in 2021 to have that explained as it would to an American reader to have every reference to Watergate spelled out as the scandal that ended the Nixon presidency in 1974.

[00:09:01] We already have these kinds of debates all the time in newsrooms about headlines. Is such-and-such a headline word or is so-and-so headline name? That is, is it a word or a name that's well-known enough to be able to go into a headline where there's no room for explanation? Those judgments can also change all the time. For instance, here is a Bloomberg headline about Peru in November. And now here's one about the same person that ran in mid-December. After being impeached, removed from office and

jailed in one day, he became more familiar to readers outside of Peru. So now just his name was enough.

[00:09:56] I sometimes think of this process as the arc of familiarity. That is, there's a sequence in which something or someone is initially barely known, known only to a few people, and then gets in the news and becomes more familiar by being in the news more and more until she or he finally reaches a point where they seem so familiar that they don't need to be especially identified. But any higher level of familiarity has its own set of traps. You may think something is well-known because you've been writing about it every day for a month, but there are still plenty of readers who may be coming to the story later than that, or just seeing it occasionally and still need that guidance.

[00:10:47] Familiarity is also a general pitfall as we get deeper and deeper into a beat or too close to a subject. It's easy to take pride in our increased knowledge and to forget the fact that because we've mastered something nuance or other it doesn't mean that our reader doesn't still need help with either the big picture on the subject or with the basics.

[00:11:13] The last two readings for the week illustrate some of these factors and finding the balance between explaining everything and just chasing the news without any explanation. In the case of the stories about South Africa's president, for instance, every new development is major breaking news for News24.com, a local news outlet writing for the local audience.

[00:11:40] Reuters, by contrast, writing for a broader audience devotes an entire article to explaining the background of the case, assuming that international readers knew nothing about it before the parliamentary committee issued a damaging report. Likewise with the German news site DW.com set out to explain the so-called Reichsbürger movement, whose members were charged with plotting the overthrow of the German government. It has years of reporting on right-wing extremism in the country to draw on.

[00:12:18] NPR's audience may not be that different from DW.com's English language website. But without the local knowledge and deep reporting behind its coverage, they made the decision to explicitly rely on the expertise of an outsider, of an academic, in an audio interview that was also reprinted as a question and answer.

[00:12:46] So to sum up some of the things we've looked at today, it's helpful to remember that our overall job as journalists is to learn things and then to share that knowledge. But how we do that depends both on what we ourselves know and what we judge that the people we're sharing it with need to know to understand it.

[00:13:09] In our next video, we'll talk about some of the nuts and bolts involved in doing that.

[00:13:15] Thanks. And I'll see you soon.