What are words worth?

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Radio is immediate ... it can go live to air in a way that TV can't ... this means things may be rough but are much more visceral. It means people can interpret through their own mind. I once interviewed Alfred Hitchcock's daughter and she told me that Hitchcock would hate the films of today because he would see the violence as too painted ... it leaves nothing to the imagination. He believed the imagination was far more powerful than anything you can see. So he would leave the worst parts of the violence out and just show its after-effects. He thought it was far more powerful to leave it up to an individual's interpretation of a sound or music that he would use in the background.

When I heard about September 11th, I was travelling in Southern India and it took three days before I saw a television. I heard about it from gossip on the streets, one newspaper article and a short radio piece. The terror in the voice of the person in that interview in the New York street, meant that my imagination was conjuring up images of September 11th far more visceral than the TV, which when I got to see it, had detached the spectacular from the human suffering. I saw bodies burning, people reaching out for help, I felt the heat, heard the screams, I saw the children.

So radio's excitement, immediacy and room for individual interpretation means it's an intimate medium. You have been in people's houses - their cars, their heads so people think they know you. I remember so many times I met people who said they thought I'd be taller and blonder. I take the first as a compliment, second ... not so sure. But people really feel they know you. While it would be a lie to say radio is fully democratic, it is hopefully accessible. I don't like big words. I like to convey things in a way that doesn't isolate listeners and makes the stories universal.

I don't like a lot of talk-back radio, but when it is used well it can be a wonderful tool for people to share stories of themselves. When I worked on Triple J, we often did talk-back on subjects that young people did not have the chance to talk about. I remember my greatest day, a Triple J letter from a kid who rode his tractor in an apple orchard. He told me Triple J went gay-bashing, he thought about the changes to the economy, he wanted a republic. Words can change hearts, souls and minds.

Problem with radio is that there is so much of it, it can and does become aural wallpaper... reduced to background noise. We don't use the medium well and can't without the resources to make really powerful radio that can work. Another limitation of the spoken word on radio is the danger to look for the quick grab. That's the 15-second piece you will hear in the news that's the attention seeker and it can be very simplistic. If you work in radio too long, danger ... you think in grabs.

I have had some experience of telling tales on Television. In some ways TV is much more powerful than radio. While it may limit our imagination by providing us with pictures, we are first and foremost visual animals and some pictures define the century ... such as the September 11th burning buildings.
The impact of TV is immediate, lasting and powerful and almost universal. It reaches to the tiniest villages all over world. And like it or lump it, the world is watching the stories that we tell ourselves, and it’s interpreting our culture through that. When I was in India, I would watch television and learned a lot about Indian society from it. Unfortunately India was watching American television and entire villages would stop and all congregate around one TV set to watch Baywatch. To them this personified America and that thanks to TV, was their interpretation of American women and western women — we liked to be ogled and we liked to wear as little as possible. I blame Baywatch for a lot ... any woman who has travelled in India will know what I mean.

In television words are often superfluous to pictures. They are used sparingly and must match the pictures. Often if there is a TV story but no pictures, television doesn’t run it. The abstract is impossible in television. There is a particular skill in writing to pictures that’s fascinating to learn. But this is a language I find often so cliché and too rehearsed. I know some shows will write a script before shooting an interview with someone and spend the whole interview making the ‘talent’ say something the way they want ... even coach them to be actors which means manufactured grabs. Of course if you can learn to speak this lingo you become good talent and get your face on the box.

Another limitation of television is that the pictures themselves can take away from what a person says. You can do a great interview and think it really told people about a place or a people and sit back and be proud of yourself and then realise that’s not what people are looking at. A friend who was one of the first female journalists in Afghanistan during the war, took all the trouble to get to the front line and did a piece for television while on a tank. She thought she was doing really important news, telling people about what was happening before a lot of other journalists got there. Afterwards her sister called her on the satellite phone to tell her she had just seen the story and my friend asked her what she thought of it. Her sister replied ‘what have you done to your hair?’

Work is far more respectable for journalists working in newspapers. The fact that words aren’t just in one ear and out the other, or lost in pictures, means they are mulled over and carry more weight. This means you have to get facts right. Stories take for ages and you need to be more of a perfectionist and far more patient. As a journalist you think you have more space but in some ways you are more limited, but the power can be enormous.

I’ve talked about some of the limitations of the media in telling tales. I’ll let you in on another. Working as a journalist very much impacts on the way you as a person sees the world. Sure there’s cynicism and reduced attention span but even worse is that you start to see everything too much as a story, you forget to interpret the world yourself and I found it narrowed my world view. I wanted to experience the world as a citizen again not a supposedly unbiased bystander. This was one reason why I embraced moving to India, a nation which I hated with a passion when I travelled there as a 21-year old.

India embraced me as a new world citizen by soaking me right between the eyes. It did not just widen my world view, it almost collapsed it with a mental overload. India is a place of a billion people and is an extraordinary onslaught, a sensory overload. A constant noise of cars and horns and people and spitting and distorted music at decibels way beyond a safe level. Strong smells of dust and diesel and dung, spices, sandalwood and sweat, and you’re constantly touched and grabbed ... there is no personal space like you have in Australia. The sights and the spectacle of colours and extraordinary things that are so different to our society mean that you are often overloaded.

Within weeks of arriving in India, I was desperate to find some space, some solitude ... I needed to empty my head at night so I could sleep. I began writing. These became diaries which led to email diaries, which led to my book Holy Cow. I suppose in the writing I was trying to understand the different ways Indians interpreted their world which was so different to my own. It was an attempt at interpreting the country. The misunderstandings are so massive and confronting that I often felt at sea. For instance, Indians don’t understand the way that Australians want to be working class and thus our humour and jokes about royalty they find appalling. This leads to misunderstandings which is sometimes frustrating, or even depressing.

I also tried to understand India through its films. I love the high camp of Bollywood dance, which is very expressive in terms of displaying all the sexuality and lewdness not permitted in society. There’s lots of pelvic thrusting and eyebrow work and coy-girl looks. And they actually act out the words of the song ... like ‘look at my pretty eyes, and my long black hair’. I tried to learn Bollywood dance and one gesture we learnt meant/told ‘don’t you tease me or I’ll say bad words at you’. Once in traffic when a group of guys were hanging out of the car next to me, I did this gesture and they had to stop the car as they were laughing so much. I asked my friend ‘Why are they laughing?’ and was told ‘You stupid, you told them you are a prostitute!’

After this, I went back to words.

Other things happened to me which set me on a quest. One evening on my way home, I saw a young sadhu come through the mist. These are Indian holy men who live in the cremation grounds. He had long dreadlocks to the ground and was covered in the ashes of the dead. He looked at me with his red eyes in a way that was like being shot with a spiritual gun. The next morning I woke with pneumonia, almost died, and then my hair fell out.

So I set out to travel India’s faiths as this is the birthplace of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, has a massive population of Muslims, sheltered the Jews and Parsees and now has this spiritual new-age supermarket for westerners that I also wanted to interpret and write about in modern day India. I took part in the festivals, the music and the rituals of many of these faiths. I spent two years listening to the stories of the people who lived within these faiths and I heard about the multitude of ways that they interpreted meaning in their lives.

I revelled in the stories of others but I felt that I had no right to tell the stories of others. I could only write my stories, I had to write a book that was subjective. I wanted readers to know that my book was not about India. It was only a book about India through the eyes of a white, western, middle class, generation X, Australian woman. So I put myself in the story, but this was quite confronting, even embarrassing. Why would anyone want to read about me, I’m not exactly interesting. It was my Indian friends who urged me to tell my story. They think this western guilt we have leads to too much self censorship. They revel in telling stories and everybody's story is equally valid.

I’ve had incredible feedback on my book. It’s obviously rung true for many people ... transported them back to India and it's
urged them to share their stories with me. I’ve received long letters and incredibly intimate details of people’s lives, even photographs of their journeys in India.

But of course ... words are limited. I still don’t think they ever explain the true experience that is India to someone. But in the media, we have an overload of options, of media, of stories from the world. There is a desire in the media for every story to be punchier and more shocking than the last and this de-sensitises us. As that song by that terrific ‘80s band, Missing Persons says “What are words for when no one listens anymore?”

But I think people are still listening when the story is constructed properly and when it’s told with a heartfelt way of communicating. I still feel that I have come back to words. I like a quote from writer Anais Nin about writing: “We write to taste life twice, in the moment and in retrospection ... we write to be able to transcend our life, to reach beyond it ... to teach ourselves to speak with others.”

That’s what words are worth to me.