On learning as you go



Writer Kaitlyn Tiffany discusses the danger of over researching, the importance of being flexible, and not being afraid to ask for help.

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What, to you, makes a successful reporting project?

I guess as a reporter, you always go in with an expectation of what the story is going to be and main themes that you want to hit, and a successful reporting project probably involves having all of those expectations be really mutated, and different surprising themes emerging from the interviews, or having interviews where the person really challenges what you were thinking about the subject. The most exciting reporting is when there's twists and turns.

I feel I learned a lot when I was writing this book, especially about some of the topics that I had already reported on. When I was at The Verge or at *The Atlantic*, there were things in fandom and specifically in One Direction fandom that I thought I already really understood, and then I learned so much more about them when I was really digging through the deep dark pits of Tumblr.

How do you start a project?

I have a problem with my day job where when I'm nervous about a story because it seems really substantial, I do true high school nerd behavior. I really regress, and I'm like, "I need to read 15 books about this before I end up writing the first thing." Sometimes I really shoot myself in the foot with that because then I just end up on weird tangents and falling into research rabbit holes that are not fruitful.

But in the case of this book, before I wrote the proposal I read basically everything I could find and realistically read about fan studies going back to the '80s and tried to understand the history of academic research because it felt like it would be a useful foundation to have. I also wanted to make sure I wasn't going to swoop in and be like, "I came up with this amazing revelation," only to learn somebody had said the same thing in 1994. I did a lot of that.

Then for the internet side of things, I just spent however long it took to try to remember what my Tumblr password was when I was 19, and then went back into that account and poked around to see which pages were still up or what links I could find that I would be able to reconstitute through the Wayback Machine, which is by the way, just the most important website ever created.

I guess I have a hard time outlining. I do a ton of research, and I have a very hard time stopping. That sounds like I'm doing a humble brag, but I'm actually not. I really procrastinate starting the work of outlining or of thinking through the writing process by just being like, "Well, I'll just read one more thing or I'll just find a few more memes before I get started," so I definitely pushed it off for a long time and was just continuing to, I don't know, waste an entire day reading Pew Research surveys about cell phone use or whatever.

There was a lot in your book about the Beatles fandom. Is that when fan research began?

There was definitely writing about fandoms that are older than the Beatles fandom. In the book, I also talked to Allison McCracken who wrote about maybe the earliest pop music fandom that resembles what we think of as pop music fandom now, which was Rudy Vallee and Bing Crosby.

There's also been a lot of discussion within the field of fandom about how at first, because most of the people who went into that branch of academia were also fans themselves, there was a little too much focus on redeeming fandom or showing fandom in a positive light, so it's gone through these existential crises of recalibrating like, "We need to be more critical" or, "Okay, now we're being too critical." I emailed some of the authors, and they were so helpful. One of the embarrassing perks of being a journalist is that someone else spends their whole career focusing on one topic, and then you can get curious about it for two days, and call them, and be like, "Can you explain this to me?" Everyone was very generous.

I feel like that really benefits someone like you who writes about technology and social media, because those people are still alive, versus if you were writing articles about some really antiquated shit, and you couldn't contact anyone because they've died or retired.

I'm going to say something tacky. I feel like sometimes as a reporter you'll look someone up, and they'll have just died two years before and it's like, "Man, that really stings more than if they were long dead. I wish I'd had this idea sooner."

That makes sense. [*laughs*] You mentioned the Wayback Machine. Do you have any other online tools or tips for sourcing good material?

The other thing that ended up being really valuable for me was just connecting with people who had been in the fandom for a really long time and either remembered things or were publicly maintaining a little bit of an amateur archive. I think that's probably something that exists in a lot of fandoms or in a lot of internet subcultures in general. These experts emerge who you can go to and say, "Do you remember this zany meme from however long ago?" And they will be able to find it or, if they can't, they'll at least affirm your memory to you.

It seems like people were super willing to talk. Despite having never listened to One Direction, I became very invested in the gossip, the lore. Especially the Larries [fans who believe in the conspiracy theory that Harry Styles and Louis Tomlinson are secretly in love] and Babygate [the conspiracy theory that Louis Tomlinson's and Briana Jungwirth's child is not his or, more radically, that the baby isn't even real]. Your interviews with these fans were so fascinating.

Well, people definitely weren't as excited to talk about those topics. The Larry community on Tumblr has become pretty isolated and skittish. I had written about Babygate a couple of times before, so there was definitely a pretty strong reaction from most of them of, "You're a grifter and a scam artist, and you were just here to profit off of telling everybody that we're freaks or something," which was not my intention, but I can see why they felt that. I mean, some people who were Larries did eventually agree to talk to me, which I really appreciated, and I hope that they think my portrayal is at least fair. I wasn't interested in holding up this weird story and being like, "Can you believe these women? They believe they spent all this time talking about this thing that's obviously not true. It's so wild," but about how these theories affected relationships within the fandom, as well as certain factions of the fandom's willingness to completely reject reality and create their own information environment in a way that I think is similar to other little pockets on the internet.

I think it was definitely hard to balance because people who really hated the Larries and thought of them as a malignant force within the fandom were much more willing to talk about Babygate than Larries themselves, so it was like, "I want to make sure I'm not getting too carried away listening to the people who really despise Larries just because they're the ones who are willing to be open with me. How do I give a fair shake to this other group that's not willing to talk?" Those chapters took a really long time.

Fans seem like they can be scary. They wield a lot of online power. Do you have any fears about the potential

reception of your book now that it's out in the world?

I don't know. The book was announced almost three years ago, so there were fans who reacted in a hostile way from day one. I wasn't surprised by that even at the time, because I know as a fan myself I'm pretty defensive while reading anything about fandom, especially if it's not by somebody whose writing I already know or whose perspective I'm already familiar with. It's just been written about in such an obnoxious and patronizing way for such a long time. It makes sense for people to be a little defensive.

Fandom is such a broad category and such a broad prompt, and there's so many different lived experiences within it that there's no way at all for me to possibly cover every perspective. I wouldn't have been able to say anything in the book if I hadn't over generalized a bit. It would've been totally abstract, or I would've just been rattling off all the different versions of each thing, and that's boring to read. I'm sure there's places where I make a statement in the book that doesn't seem true to somebody's experience as a fan, where they're like, "I don't know where she's getting this. This isn't what it is for me." I think I just had to accept that and try my best not to fill the book up with caveats that are like, "I know this might not be true for everyone, blah, blah, blah." I think that is a scourge in modern writing, especially on the internet. It's just boring.

It's too careful and pandering.

There were several moments of crisis where I was worried that I might be saying what I personally think a little bit too forcefully and laying out what I think is good, and bad, and right, and wrong, and maybe moralizing. I didn't want to do that, but also I had to pick a perspective. I couldn't just be mealy mouthed.

When you took that trip to LA and set out to find Harry Styles' vomit, it reminded me of method acting. Do you generally submerge yourself into the world of your subjects?

I mean, I think I always want an excuse to travel for stories. When you're a child dreaming of being a journalist, you don't really think about just sitting at a computer all day long and calling people on your iPhone. You think about it as being something you do out in the world. I was like, "This book is getting away from me in the sense that it's just too much in my head. It's just too much looking at a computer in my apartment. I feel really frustrated by the things I'm not able to find online, and I think it would feel good to try to do something really fan-ish and weird."

It was a really fun trip. I only did things that Harry Styles had done, so I went from the airport straight to Randy's Donuts, because Harry styles has a Randy's Donuts sweatshirt that he jogs in sometimes, and I got donuts. Then, I drove to Malibu and hung out around this restaurant that Cindy Crawford invested in, that Harry Styles has been seen at. It was a ridiculous day, but it was also so fun. Then I looked for the vomit shrine. I obviously couldn't really find it because it was just a nondescript patch of highway. I just drove up and down the 101 a couple of times and was like, "Okay, well I've covered it. I've covered the territory."

You for sure saw it. You just didn't know you were seeing it.

Yeah, exactly. Actually, that was the first time I'd ever really explored Los Angeles. It felt very dreamy to have the exhilarating freedom of being an adult with some amount of discretionary income where I could go do something really ridiculous, without being so grown up that I would pause over doing something totally pointless.

Some of my favorite moments in the book were the stories from your own life or your own experiences with fandom. How do you balance personal anecdotes with reporting in general?

I've scaled back a little bit on personal disclosure in my work at The Atlantic. It was something that I did a lot when I first started in journalism because I was blogging, and that was what I was reading. I liked reading stuff where people would put funny little personal stories into everything they wrote. Also, I found myself wildly entertaining, so I wanted to talk about my life all the time. It was an exciting time of life too, when you're in your early twenties. Things are happening to you all the time that feel really interesting, worth sharing. Then

when I started writing the book, I wanted to include some personal stuff because the subject felt so personal to me, but I also felt that some of the points I wanted to make would be a little bit abstract for the reader if I didn't ground them in a specific personal experience.

At the beginning of the book, when I'm talking about how I became a fan of One Direction, at first, I was just like, "Oh well, I saw that documentary with my sisters, and I just thought they were very charming, and then I was a fan." Then I was reading it back after the first draft of the book, and I was like, "This doesn't feel very useful or honest to me. I need to be a little bit more frank about what was going on," which was that I was extremely lonely and feeling like a real freak being at college and not really having any friends. I had zero romantic experience to speak of, and I was having these weird fears about whether I would ever be part of a community or a circle again that felt good, comfortable, and safe the way that my high school experience did.

I'm used to writing about myself a lot, but in a way that's very funny, flippant, and not necessarily totally honest, at least not in a way that's embarrassing or difficult. I had to put in the more vulnerable stuff later, but I felt like it was necessary to illustrate how people often find fandom during challenging times in their life.

Kaitlyn Tiffany Recommends:

Dinner With Friends (2001)

Dinner with friends—at the most underrated restaurant in Midtown Manhattan, Ted's Montana Grill

The @realhousewivessmoking Instagram account

The Selena Gomez song "Bad Liar"

Neapolitan ice cream sandwiches

Name
Kaitlyn Tiffany

Vocation
writer

Amelia Holowaty Krales