

The Tim Ferriss Show Transcripts

Episode 58: Alex Blumberg

Show notes and links at tim.blog/podcast

Tim Ferriss: Alex, welcome to the show. Alex?

[Audio plays]

Tim Ferriss: This is Tim Ferriss, and welcome to another episode of the Tim Ferriss show, where I deconstruct world class performers of all sorts of types, ranging from billionaire investors to chess prodigies to actors to writers to athletes and everything in between. In this episode, we have a real treat and it's a two part episode with Alex Blumberg, who is very well known as a producer for *This American Life*, co-host of *Planet Money*, and also the cofounder of Gimlet Media, which has currently two blockbuster podcasts, *Startup*, and *Reply All*.

And in the first part, which you're currently listening to, we are going to talk to Alex about all sorts of aspects of the business of storytelling, the art of storytelling including gear that he uses, etc. The second part is going to be an excerpt from a class that he taught on creativelive.com. It normally costs about \$100.00, and I advise that company so I was able to pull out about a half hour of his teaching a class about the art of the interview, crafting the perfect question, etc. That is part two. I implore you to listen to both. I really enjoyed this. And without further ado, please enjoy Alex Blumberg.

Alex, welcome to the show.

Alex Blumberg: Great to be here. Thanks for having me.

Tim Ferriss: And I have to start off, because we have been scheduling and I know you're racing to get a show out the door. Does it ever get any easier?

Alex Blumberg: I hope so. I really hope so. It's sort of an insane project that I'm doing, which is trying to create a regularly occurring documentary podcast about a company that's starting up, while at the same time trying to start that company. Because both of them are sort of full time jobs. So yeah.

Tim Ferriss: How do you balance – because I've listened to every episode of Startup and have followed it very closely for a whole host of reasons. How do you balance the real time documentary nature of the show with planning, say, an editorial calendar and actually having things locked and loaded and ready to go in advance?

Alex Blumberg: I don't balance it. That's the problem. We don't have things locked and loaded and ready to go in advance. We're editing – we'd just finished editing this week's episode this morning, and then we just tracked it. That's why I was a little late with you. I was tracking it in the studio today, and then it will go up tonight. So that's how close to the wire we are. And you'll hear – this episode is all about burnout, and it's all about how –

Tim Ferriss: I was wondering when that episode would come.

Alex Blumberg: Because there's a period – I think there's a period in a company's life where people are like: well, this is just a startup; this is the startup experience. And then there's a point at which, probably right around where we are, four or five months into it, where you're like, "It's a startup but it shouldn't be this hard." Sort of realizing that we have to change some things. We have to add some more support. And part of it is just like you just don't know. Like I didn't know – I mean – you know, you don't know what's possible. We just didn't have enough capacity to do what we were trying to do.

Tim Ferriss: And what is your current team look like – well, first question is what is tracking? I'm still a novice at this and I have a ton of questions. But what is tracking, exactly?

Alex Blumberg: When you're doing sort of a documentary style podcast, which is sort of the kinds that we do, where you're – we have a script and so what I'll do is I'll go out and I'll gather tape in the field. Then I'll record different conversations with people, and then I will edit those down. And so I have a bunch of sort of basically select tape that I've gathered and I've edited down and cut. So it's like I'll have maybe like – you know, 25 minutes of edited tape. And then what I have to do is stitch that together with a script. And so I'll write the script, and then we'll do edits on that script.

And so I'll read it aloud in the office. We'll all sit around a table, sort of like a table read, I guess. I'll sit around, I'll read my script, and I'll play the tape that I've cut from the computer where it's supposed to go in the story. And then people will give us notes on the script and sort of say: this part was dragging, and this part

should come earlier, and this part you can just totally get rid of; it's boring, whatever. And then you rewrite and rewrite and rewrite, and then finally you get to the final script.

And then you go into the studio and track it. And that's when you actually just lay down your voice tracks. And then those all get mixed together into the final product.

Tim Ferriss: Got it. And the actual reviewing of the tape, so you capture a lot of interview, obviously. And in one of the episodes of Startup you had one of your employees reviewing those tapes. Do you personally review those tapes or do you have someone do a first pass attempt to pull out the interesting stuff?

Alex Blumberg: It goes both ways. Usually, I've been the one getting the tape so I have heard it because I was there. I was there with the microphone and the recorder. But usually that's my producer who actually does the first pass through and pulls all the selects.

Tim Ferriss: Got it. What are the criteria for pulling the selects? What makes something worth being in the show?

Alex Blumberg: I think what you're asking, Tim, is what makes good tape, which is basically the question –

Tim Ferriss: That's right. That's exactly what I'm asking.

Alex Blumberg: That's the question that has consumed my life for the past 20 years. So I have an answer for you. One of the things – there's a couple things that you're looking for when you're going through the tape. Because I have a script, because I'm narrating it, I can sort of say pretty much all the basic information usually better than anybody that I'm talking to. So what I'm going for are specific moments when I'm talking to people. I'm going for specific moments that have some kind of deep, emotional resonance or where something very live and unexpected as happened, or where there is just very authentic emotion has been expressed.

And those are the moments that I go for. It's almost sort of like if I'm talking to somebody about whatever, just to borrow an example from my [inaudible] money days, bond prices. What I don't want is somebody talking about bond prices. I want somebody expressing some sort of emotion about it, if that's possible. Because I can do all the nuts and bolts information transfer. And so what you're looking for in your interview subjects

is something that you can't provide yourself. Some unique perspective.

So that's one whole category of good tape is sort of like emotionally resonant, emotionally authentic, where something interesting or unexpected has happened just sort of in the moment. The other category is somebody just telling you a really good yarn, like a really good narrative. And so that's the other thing we look for. At This American Life we had a term for this. We just called it an anecdote, but what we really meant was a little story.

Like just for an example, if I start to talk to you, and I say, "You know, Tim, this morning I was leaving my house. I walked out the door and I looked up in the sky. And I saw something that I couldn't believe." Like you want to hear what I said next, right?

Tim Ferriss: Right. That's a very unfulfilling story as it is.

Alex Blumberg: So that's the story. Like we're hardwired to be like one sequence of action, another sequence of action, and it's going to build towards something. We want to hear what it's building toward. And if I say to you, "I saw something I couldn't believe: a cloud." You'd be like: that's a boring ass story. But if I said "A UFO," then you're like: oh, that's an interesting story. But the mechanics of it, the fact that it's a story and it has a beginning, and it has a narrative progression and sort of rising action, human beings I think are sort of hardwired to want to pay attention to that. That's what we've been telling each other for 40,000 years.

And so those are the other things you're going for, is like people telling you stories.

Tim Ferriss: And the process – I'm so fascinated because I'm struggling with this myself – the process of putting together an episode, especially when you currently have the real time aspect of it which seems to complicate matters tremendously, how many people do you currently have working on each episode of let's just say Startup, and what are their roles?

Alex Blumberg: So that's the thing about this stuff. It's so much more time consuming than the other main kind of podcast which is out there, which is a straight interview podcast like what we're doing, which are also – like all these elements can be possible in those kind of podcasts, as well. And so what we're doing is sort of – like I go back and forth, like is this insane to be spending all this time

producing 20 minutes of one kind of podcast when another kind of podcast you could produce in 20 min, you know what I mean?

And so what we have is – so right now on Startup, it's just me and my producer Kaitlin, and then another employee, Lisa, who is going to be producing the second season of Startup. That's not quite enough. Startup comes out every two weeks, and because I've been doing this for so long and I've internalized so much of this stuff, I'm probably more productive at it than somebody else. So we're not quite getting by with that, but we would definitely need – we need another body or two for sure.

Tim Ferriss: Aside from the producer, you also have an engineer who does post cleanup and that type of thing?

Alex Blumberg: Right. On staff it's me and Kaitlin, our producer, and Lisa. And then we also have other people on staff who can help with the edit, which is a really, really important part of it. So then we'll usually have one or two other people sitting in to do the edit. So where I sit around and do the table read, they'll give me notes and say this part was slow, this part wasn't. So that's a really important thing. And then we also outsource our transcripts so we have people logging all that tape so that it's easier to go through. So we have people providing transcripts of the tape.

And then we have an engineer who mixes the episode, which is basically everything from doing all sorts of things that I don't understand, like putting compression on it and making it sound really good. But also just sort of like putting it all together and making it sound good, making the levels right, all that stuff.

Tim Ferriss: One thing that struck me about Reply All, the other show that I've been listening to from Gimlet Media was listening to the launch of that and how the hosts decided to join forces with you. And one of the things they mentioned was wanting you as an editor or having you run to them – run to and from the two shows, working with them as an editor. Does that primarily mean that you're working on the script and reviewing the transcripts? What are you doing as an editor?

Alex Blumberg: What I think of myself as, and I think one of the reasons that I started this company, I think my primary skill, like probably if I had to say here's the thing that I'm best at, it is being an editor. And being an editor means – the way I think about it, it's sort of like from the beginning. It's basically being a collaborator with the host, with the talent to getting the best show that you can get.

What that means is that when we have a weekly story meeting for Reply All where we'll talk for an hour about what are the stories that they want to pursue, and we'll think about interesting angles to go at that story with. We'll decide if it's worth it or not.

And then we'll sort of plan like okay, who do we want to talk to? Who would be some interesting people to talk to in the story? What questions do we want to ask them? Like the questions are really important. If you go out and you don't ask the right questions, you can come back with nothing. You can come back with no good tape. And so you have to sort of design your questions so you're giving yourself a higher chance than average of getting good tape.

So we do all that. And then when they come back and they write the script, then I'll go through the script with them.. And usually we do at least one pass but sometimes two, and maybe even three passes, depending on how tricky a story is. Where we'll really dive in deep and get into the language and say: you're saying this but it's not quite right, and so it's – I think when people see it for the first time from the outside, it's like they can't believe how much actual work goes into the making of this stuff.

One of the big questions is how much of that work is actually necessary work and how much of that work are we spinning our wheels? But my contention has been that to really – if you look at the very top of the charts on iTunes, a lot of those shows have that amount of labor embedded in the programs that they're putting out. Like I come from This American Life, which is where I learned all this stuff. There's even more editing and production work that goes into making those shows. And I know certainly Serial, they were working on that for a year, at least.

So I think it's related, but I'm not sure.

Tim Ferriss:

Oh, it's massive. I was blown away and not terribly surprised when I heard that Serial had a team working on it for a year prior to the launch. Didn't surprise me at all. As someone who is a very plotting writer himself, it didn't really surprise me. How did you decide – actually, before I jump away from the editing, what do you do as an editor differently from other people? Because you're clearly very good at it. The output of the shows reflects that. So the question maybe is, why aren't people better editors or what do you do differently?

Alex Blumberg:

I think it is a bunch of things. I think This American Life was a real editing shop. It's a pretty special place. In that, Ira is a really great editor but he's also very encouraging to people to sort of do their own thing. Like it's his show, but he really encourages you to do your own thing within that show. So every – when I work there, every story that I thought – that I wanted to do that I could sort of make a good case for, I was able to do and I was able to write it myself.

So I think part of being a good editor is being - is wanting to encourage others to sort of – having that feeling that if we're working on this together, my ego feels like I got some of the credit because I was in there from the beginning but you're also happy to share the credit with the person who's doing the story. So I think part of it goes back to that, sort of how do I think of myself as an editor. And at This American Life, it was sort of an elevated job. And then I think partly it's sort of like when I got to NPR, I realized that the conception of the job was your reporter goes out, they come back, and then they play you a story and you're basically – it's not your time.

It's the time – you know, you make a couple suggestions: I didn't understand this part, I didn't understand that part. But you're not thinking big about what's the idea that we're trying to go towards with this story? What's the new thing we're trying to say? And so I think partly, also what makes a good editor is getting in there from the beginning and talking with the reporters about what are we trying to say? What's the interesting thing? What's the new thing that we're going for, here?

If we're doing a story that's been done a lot, like – I don't know, politics or homelessness or whatever it is, like something that you've heard about in the news a lot – race – like how are we going to talk about it in a different way, in a new way, in a surprising way? A lot of the work that makes a story good goes in at the very beginning. And I think that's a lot of editors don't think about their jobs that way, and so I think that helps me. If I'm in there from the beginning and talking about it, it's easier. One other thing that I think about editing – just quickly – is that like one of the biggest jobs of the editor is just paying attention to your own boredom.

People who get into journalism get in because I'm interested in the world, and I have a natural curiosity, and I want to satisfy that curiosity. But you know, you're still – you've got to keep your audience interested, and the editor can help do that. You have to

be curious about the world but you also have to know – you have to have this sense and you're listening to your boredom; something I had to learn to do but once I did, it's really helpful.

Tim Ferriss: What are the symptoms of boredom? I know that might sound funny, but what are the symptoms of boredom that maybe you didn't listen to in the early days as much?

Alex Blumberg: I think you try to sort of like – if somebody reads something that is – if somebody that you like, that you work together, they're sitting across the table from you and they read something that is sort of a boring sentence, or they've come through a boring thing, or somebody is talking on tape and you don't quite know what they're saying or what the point is, because you like the person and because you're a human being with decent human emotions, you'll be trying to think. Like: oh, probably what the person was trying to say was this, so therefore – no, that all makes sense because – you make up for the reporter who's doing the read.

And that's good. Like that's decent human behavior to try to meet somebody halfway and be understanding and empathetic to what they're saying. But there's something that happens on the radio or in audio. When you're listening, the listener doesn't do that. And so you have to train yourself out of that instinct to make up, to sort of fill in the gaps with what people are saying. So one sign is just this sort of glimmer of: wait, I'm confused, here. And it's often at the back of your head. You don't quite get it.

But you didn't have to pay attention to it because you sort of get what's going on, but there's some question in your mind, like: is that the thing that's going on that I think it is? I think it is. But it's very, very slight. You have to train that to sort of come to the beginning of your brain, to the forefront of your brain, that feeling. Because the minute that feeling happens, you know that's a spot that needs to be edited.

And the other part is just sort of like you find yourself drifting in an edit. And if you're drifting in an edit, it's not your fault; it's theirs. You know what I mean? That's harsh but that's what you have to do. If I'm reading through and somebody who's listening to my story is drifting, that is my fault. I have to keep you from drifting. And so the same thing if the shoe is on the other foot, then the same thing is true. You're the editor. Your job is not to be engaged. Their job is to engage you. And so the minute you feel yourself drifting, that's another section that needs to be edited.

Tim Ferriss: Definitely. You brought up things being unclear or hard to understand. What I've found as a writer, when I send things to my friends who are writers to have them proof a chapter, if I ask them to indicate – if I first ask them to indicate what they like and dislike, they might try to appease me or feel badly about hurting my feelings. So I always start with: just point out what isn't clear. That usually yields a much better result because they don't feel like they're being as judgmental towards me personally. So I always find that a really helpful place to start.

Alex Blumberg: And that's even more important in audio because you can't go back and reread audio. You know what I mean? Now, in the age of on-demand audio you can go back. This is truer back in the radio days when there was literally no mechanism to go back and re-listen. And so what happens is, the minute you're listening, if you're confused, you're like: wait, what was that thing? And you try to figure in your brain what was the thing that was confusing you. And then your brain has taken its eye off the ball, basically, and had not listened to the next sentence that's coming out.

And then it's like a train wreck. Like you never catch up. So one moment of confusion can utterly destroy an otherwise beautiful story. So you have to be on a special guard about that in audio, I think particularly.

Tim Ferriss: What does a producer do? So this has come up quite a bit. You mentioned you have a producer, for instance. For Startup in particular, what does the producer do? What is their job?

Alex Blumberg: It's one of those words like manager, which is like: wait, what's a manager? Yeah. So a producer I think also has many meanings. But in my case what a producer does, so my producer helps me think through the interviews I'm going to do. Often will listen back through the tape, transcribe the tape sometimes or make sure that it's transcribed. She will pull the interesting pieces of tape – usually we'll consult about it but then she'll go and actually produce a session in the editing software that we use that has the pulls that we want. She'll also think through how to structure each episode, and all sorts of other things.

When I was at This American Life, my job was producer. That was what I was called. And you basically help build the story with the reporter. You're really sort of like a partner in the creation of the story. And the reporter's voice is doing it, and the reporter is often writing and, in some cases, finalizing the writing and in some cases really doing most of the writing. But really, you're a team.

And structuring the story is so important, again in audio especially, I think just because you can get so confused easily. So generally what the producers are in the audio are their experts at sort of structuring the story.

How does the story begin, and what are the emotional moments that we're leading to and how do we contextualize those moments with script? So often when I was a producer at This American Life, we'd be working with writers who were really good writers who had not done that much audio. And often what I would do is I would cut the tape, and then we would meet. And I would just sort of talk them through. So we would have gone out and done a bunch of interviews. I would cut down to the moments that we were going to use. And then we'd get back in the room. And I would tell them: okay, here's how I think you can start, and here's what I think you want to say to start it up.

And then we're going to go to this piece of tape, and this is the first piece of tape we're going to use and it introduces this character in the story. And then from there, you're going to want to write something like this. And sometimes I would have dummy language in there. And I would basically provide a roadmap for the reporter or the writer that would sort of lead through the tape and get to a finished piece. So that's what they do.

Tim Ferriss: At Gimlet Media, which is of course a much smaller operation than This American Life, who's handling releases and all of that kind of stuff?

Alex Blumberg: The producer would be doing that kind of stuff, as well. So that's the – producers sort of like do sort of the high level conceptual structuring stuff, and then they also transcribe tape and sort of like handle all the details and make sure the plane tickets are purchased, and various people have been set up and booked into various studios and all that sort of stuff.

Tim Ferriss: I know we're getting into some nitty gritty stuff, but I'm so fascinated by it. And then we're going to go kind of broader picture. What type of editing software do you use?

Alex Blumberg: ProTools.

Tim Ferriss: ProTools. And with Reply All, for instance, which is perhaps a little more – can be planned a little more in advance, from the initial idea pitch meeting to the finished episode, how long does that currently take and how far out have you planned already? Not

necessarily gathering all the information and doing the interviews, but decided on the subject matter for episodes.

Alex Blumberg: We're not as far planned out as we want to be. We have things on the calendar going out maybe a month or a month and a half. But it's always a race every week to get everything done, especially as you'll hear in the next episode of Startup. And so some of those are just ideas, some of those are – you know, all the tape is in and it's been edited and we just have to sort of like wrangle it into shape. But I would say that we don't have anything – our goal is to sort of get to a point where we can be a week ahead.

Like we can have next week's episode in the can this week: like done, recorded, the ads put in, everything done, mixed the music in. And I would say we're several months away from that goal. We just need to get better at it and build that muscle.

Tim Ferriss: What tools do you guys currently use? I, of course, take – I'm an avid hyper graphic note taker. I heard Sharpee mentioned in one of the episodes. What type of tools do you guys use for organizing all of this stuff besides ProTools? What's the software or the whiteboard? What do you guys use?

Alex Blumberg: We use actual whiteboards. We have like little whiteboards that float around the office that have the sort of like checklists of everything that needs to be done every episode. You know, sort of like just the basic stuff that you forget. Like did we get the ad copy correct? Did we email all the people? Did we write the copy for the web? All that stuff, you know? Did we get the list of songs that we're using in the episodes so we can put them on the website?

And then we do a lot of collaboration so most of the stuff that we write, our scripts are all written in a Google doc. And we have multiple people editing through the Google doc. That really changed my world when that came around. And that's fantastic. We use Slack at the office – the younger guys do. I don't really know how to use it, really. I think those are the main ones. The Google docs are the main thing that we use to sort of collaborate write on. And then actual whiteboards. We schedule stuff through Google calendar, also.

Tim Ferriss: Do you use any kind of project management software, like a Basecamp or a Sauna or Trello or anything like that?

Alex Blumberg: I have worked on projects where I have used Basecamp before. Like when we did our website design, we used Basecamp with the design team that was designing the website. That was really useful. I find Basecamp to be useful for distributed teams. When I was at Planet Money, we did this big, crazy project where we followed a tee shirt around the world as it got made. And we did this elaborate interactive website about the project where we had all these videos and stuff like that. And that was like a couple different teams, one in New York and one in DC. And we used Basecamp for that project, as well and that was really helpful.

On a day-to-day basis, I don't use it as much just because it's pretty simple what we're doing. The bulk of our work is wrangling tape and writing scripts. That's the day-to-day. What I'm doing every day is that, essentially.

Tim Ferriss: What do you guys currently use for capturing tape in the field, in terms of equipment?

Alex Blumberg: We use flash card recorders and nice microphones. We use these Task M recorders. Some of us use Sonys. They're pretty nice, broadcast quality sort of – they're not the nicest but they're the pretty nice ones. And then we have nice mikes.

Tim Ferriss: What type of – if you know offhand, and I'm involved with Creative Live so I managed to grab a PDF of some of your gear. I don't know if it's changed since then. But I'm an advisor for Creative Live. And by the way, I'll link to it in the show notes for everyone but I've been very impressed with the class. So we'll come back to that.

Alex Blumberg: Oh, thanks.

Tim Ferriss: But just the master class in asking questions, so of course I have performance anxiety right now.

Alex Blumberg: That's hilarious. You're anxious around me.

Tim Ferriss: Well, that's why I decided to swing completely the opposite direction and ask very boring, hyper specific, tactical questions.

Alex Blumberg: Well, no. These are – concrete details, that's another one people forget. Like people go too broad and I think what's often interesting is the nuts and bolts of people's processes. Often I'll ask these exact kind of questions, sort of like on a day-to-day basis, like what are you actually doing? I do these Squarespace – I do

these ads, right? Where I just interview somebody in the company about what their job is like in the company that's sponsoring us. I guess we're gonna do one of these ads later.

But my goal there is just to try to find one sort of like – I call it like a vivid moment. A moment where it's sort of like – one time I found myself talking to a treasurer of one company and I wasn't getting very much vivid stuff. I was sort of like: what's it like to be a treasurer? And wasn't getting very much. And finally, it was: do you actually sign your name on the checks? And he was like, "We have an auto signer but sometimes I actually sign the checks," and then we got into this whole discussion of sort of where he sits when he signs the checks and how he signs them, and how much time he allocates –

Tim Ferriss: And how long it takes.

Alex Blumberg: – and does he block it off in his calendar? And that was by far the best moment of the interview because all of a sudden you were – actually it felt real. And you got a real sense of sort of like the details of this guy's life. So I'm all for these kind of concrete questions.

Tim Ferriss: Okay. Well, I'm going to follow along with some digging, then. I noticed in the list of equipment – and again, I'll link to all of this in the show notes for people – that you have a boom mike. And I have, for instance, a zoom recorder, H4N, and I have a nother model. So two follow up questions. Is there any reason you chose the Task Cam over Zoom or anything else, and then the second is what do you use the boom for? Because when I'm sitting down with someone, I find these hand held – the zoom recorders, for instance, work quite well by themselves. They work even better with a lav mike or something like that, or just a handheld stage mike connected with XLRs. What do you use the boom mike for?

Alex Blumberg: I can give you a lot of BS about it but the truth is, it's like habit, basically. Like these are the microphones that we started using at This American Life. When I first got there, I didn't know anything about audio. I am not a super technically – like I know a lot about the story structure. I know exactly what I need to know about recording equipment. I'm not super tech savvy that way. And so partly it's just sort of like those are the ones we use, and I got used to them. When I'm out in the field, I know exactly what I need to do with that particular mike to get the exact sound that I want to get and I don't have to mess around with something new.

The one thing that I will say – so the task cam, that was the recommendation that I read on a website and I bought it and it's worked for me, although there are certain things that I don't love about it. So I feel like you're fine – whatever works for you, you're fine with there. The mike is more important than the recorder. So part of it is just sort of habit. The real part, I guess, is that as long as it's a directional mike, what I'm trying to do often is get intimate sounding conversations.

So if you have an omni directional mike, which is the mike's recording pattern is picking up from all around the whole field from where you're recording, you just have to worry a little bit more about placement and you sometimes don't get – it doesn't feel like they're as present. Whereas if you're using one of these (unintelligible)-directional boom mikes, like the one I use, it's really weird. Like when you point it at somebody you can hear them, and when you point it away, you really don't hear them very well. It really drowns all out all the surrounding sound. And so what that means is you get this pretty nice, very, very intimate sound.

And then if you're in a place where lots of other stuff is happening around and you want to document the fact that you're out in the field and there's a rodeo going on behind you or whatever, when you're done with the interview you just point the mike at the rodeo and get that ambience. And then you can just use it as an ambience bed. So I like the intimacy that you get with a nice, tight boom mike.

Tim Ferriss: That makes perfect sense. What numbers do you check on a daily or weekly basis? And not to beat a dead horse, but do you guys use Chartbeat? Did you end up using that and what other numbers besides just straightforward revenue numbers for sponsors, what kind of stuff do you guys check, if anything?

Alex Blumberg: Again, I was obsessively checking our SoundCloud numbers because we host on SoundCloud. And SoundCloud feeds our iTunes. Any time somebody would subscribe to Startup, it downloads to their phone, that registers as a play on SoundCloud. So SoundCloud was sort of capturing both the people who were listening streaming it through the web, or through our website or whatever, and the people who were downloading it to their phones through iTunes or some other pod catcher. So it was a one stop shop for our listening numbers, basically. And so I would check that. And that was pretty much everything I checked.

I know PJ and Alex, the hosts of Reply All, are much more tech savvy and much more sort of aware of what's going on. And so every once in awhile I'll ask them what are they looking at. And they look at Chartbeat a lot. But I don't look at that that much.

Tim Ferriss: Got it. So I want to rewind the clock a little bit. I'm looking at your bio and it says that you've worked as a social worker, a caterer, an eighth grade science teacher and a graduate level journalism professor. Tell me the story of how you got to radio, if you could.

Alex Blumberg: I guess the story starts – I was a teacher. I taught eighth grade science and I did that for four years. This was in Chicago.

Tim Ferriss: How old were you at the time?

Alex Blumberg: This was basically right after college. This was in my mid to late 20s. So starting at maybe like 24 to the time I was 28, or something like that, 28, 29. I was a teacher. And I had – basically it starts like – I had always been interested in this kind of I guess what you would call long form narrative nonfiction. I had read a couple magazines since the time I was in high school. I liked the *New Yorker Magazine*, and I liked *Harper's Magazine*, and I would read these books of sort of like Joseph Mitchell, who's this sort of famous old nonfiction writer. I would read E.B. White and stuff like that. John Hershey, the guy who wrote *Hiroshima*. Or is it Hersey? Hershey, right?

And so I was into that kind of stuff. And then I would – but for some reason – I was a pretty good student and I did okay, but somehow it never occurred to me that I could actually do that for a living. And I don't know why. Like I really don't know why. I just somehow thought that people who did that were some sort of different world of people that – like I would never be able to access that world. Now, it's ridiculous. The thought that an upper middle class Jewish kid could ever make it in the media world. Of course.

How could that happen? I don't know why I was so – I think it was just like a profound lack of – I didn't know anybody who had ever done that. I grew up in Cincinnati, Ohio, which was like not super provincial but certainly not a media capitol. And so people who succeeded became doctors and lawyers, and that was sort of it. So anyway, then I started dating a girl from New York when I was in Chicago. That was more of where media happened and she knew people who were actually getting jobs at magazines. And I

was like: oh, getting a job at a magazine, isn't that a cool thing. We dated for awhile. We dated for like four or five years.

She eventually broke up with me, which was one of the more profound experiences of my life, and that was really what kicked me in the ass and sort of was like – that happened in my late 20s, and that was when I was telling myself – it was basically spite. I was worried that her plan was to go back to New York and go to film school, and I was terrified that she was going to become a famous director and I was going to be sitting around supervising recess. And so it was really that, that was like: okay, you gotta try to – this dream that you haven't really admitted to yourself, so you should just try to do it.

So I started trying to freelance and I had an internship at Harper's Magazine that I successfully applied to and got over the summer in between one of those years when I was teaching. And then I eventually, through Harpers, I got a job as the administrative assistant at This American Life, which was the public radio program and podcast. It was just starting. This was back I guess in '97, October of '97 when I got the administrative assistant job. It had been on the air I think two years at that point and had become – had already made a name for itself but wasn't the beast that it is today, the podcast king maker that it is today.

So that got me started. So I was an administrative assistant and I sort of learned on the job. There were four of us back then. It was Ira, three producers and me.

Tim Ferriss: What a perfect timing. Man, what a great job. Just the four of you. That's amazing.

Alex Blumberg: Yeah. And I learned a lot on the job. But I was the administrative assistant. I was the one answering the mail and running to the post office and doing all the stuff that needed to be done. And because we were so short staffed back then, and because Ira really had no idea what he was getting himself into, like a weekly hour of documentary radio where the standards are higher than anybody has ever had before. He is a perfectionist. And I learned a lot about the value of being a perfectionist from him. But the fact that he was trying to produce that with three producers who didn't really know what they were doing because nobody knew what they were doing. He was just trying to invent it. So it was all hands on deck.

And so occasionally I would get to produce stuff or help with the editorial side of things, and so I learned on the job. But then there came a moment where I had actually produced – semi, like not what I would call producing now, but I had assisted in the creation of one of our big early shows which was an hour long documentary about Harold Washington, the first black mayor of Chicago. And it was sort of a hit in the early days. It had been just a bear to produce and I had been working all kinds of crazy hours. I came in after it aired, the Monday after it aired, fully expecting like okay, now I've succeeded and I've passed this test and now I'm going to be made a producer.

And I said what did he think? Was he going to make me a producer? And he was like, “No, I can't. I don't have the money to make you a producer. I don't have the position open. And I need an administrative assistant.” And I was like, “Oh, well, if you ever did have money and the position open, would you hire me?” And he was like, “I don't know, probably not because you don't have the experience still that I need. There's other people now who have that experience.” And I was like, “Well, what do I need to get that experience?” And he said, “I don't know, you probably should quit and start freelancing.”

And I don't think he thought – and now, as a CEO of my own company, I have this experience all the time where I'll sort of think out loud and I don't realize that the people I'm talking to are hanging on every word. I'm sure that was what happened with him. But to me, I was like okay, you've just given me the map of how I want to get my dream job so I'm gonna quit. So I put in my notice and I arranged a loan from my parents to help me live for the year, like ten grand. I was like: if you give me ten grand in lieu of graduate school, I'm gonna make it as a freelance writer. And I did. I started to freelance and I got stories I magazines and newspapers and stuff like that and I continued to do radio.

And then a year and a half later I had sort of built a little freelance career for myself, which was going pretty well. And then there was finally an opening at This American Life and things had been going so well that I actually was like: oh, I'm not going to apply for that because now I'm doing this other thing. And then finally, somebody was like: this was your dream job, right? And I was like, “Yeah, I guess it was.” And then I applied, and then immediately I was like: I really want this job. And then I got it. That was how that happened.

Tim Ferriss: Wow. So when you were freelancing – let’s see, here. The writing that you were doing, did you find the writing took off more so than the radio? Were they taking off in tandem? Did the radio start to outpace the writing? How did that go during your year of freelancing?

Alex Blumberg: One of the biggest lessons I learned is never, ever return your key card. So I still had my key card from WBEZ, the radio station where I had been working.

[Audio plays]

Tim Ferriss: Coming up: why good radio doesn’t necessarily apply to television, the value of perfectionism, and the good and bad habits that Alex picked up from *This American Life* and *Ira Glass*. But first, a word from our sponsors.

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Were they taking off in tandem? Did the radio start to outpace the writing? How did that go during your year of freelancing?

Alex Blumberg: One of the biggest lessons I learned is never, ever return your key card. So I still had my key card from WBEZ, the radio station where I had been working. And so I could come in, and I had

some freelance projects that I was still working on at that station. So they had hired me to help produce this poetry series they were doing. And so I was picking up freelance work both in radio and on the writing side. And it was pretty equal. Like I did a big radio documentary, and I did something for a show called *The Savvy Traveler*, which was a travel show back then.

So within the public radio world there was enough stuff that needed to be done and not that many people who were like sort of free to do it, that I could pick up sort of work at that point, as well. So it was about half and half.

Tim Ferriss: Got it. How did you come to then cofound Planet Money? And what was the timeline between landing that dream job as producer and getting to Planet Money?

Alex Blumberg: I guess there was a year – there was a decade in between getting the job. I got the job in '99 and then Planet Money started in 2009. And one of the nice things about working at This American Life was the job was constantly changing as I was there. So I never got bored. I started and I sort of took a long time; the learning curve is pretty steep to get good at producing documentary radio. The first couple of years, I was just trying to get my head above water and figure out how this stuff worked and what people were talking about in these edits, and how to become better at recognizing good moments and all that stuff.

And then 9/11 was – it sounds cheesy and trite to say, but 9/11 sort of changed the focus of the show quite a bit. We did a couple of shows on 9/11 and then we just got – I think it made us a little bit more – we'd always been serious journalistically, but it felt like we were able to tell kinds of stories that were both journalistic and human in a way that felt like it filled a niche a little bit. So we did a lot of reporting on that and on the war. And we went to an aircraft carrier, so that sort of changed. And then we did a TV show in there, too. We did this big TV show for Showtime and I was an executive producer on the TV show.

So then I was spending three or four years learning how to do TV, which was a whole other huge learning curve and man, did we get our asses handed to us there. We thought we were storytelling experts, and then we got into this new medium and we were like nothing we know works.

Tim Ferriss: Can you give some examples? Yeah, I'd love some examples or an explanation of why it doesn't work. Why didn't it translate?

Alex Blumberg: Well, everything that I laid out to you about what's good tape, what you're going for in a radio interview, like that stuff doesn't apply to TV. You can make an amazing radio story out of one or two people telling a story that happened to them in the past. Like I won a big award called the Third Coast Audio Award at This American Life, which was essentially two people, a brother and a sister, talking about a story that happened to them 60 years ago. And it was just the two of them talking, and we intercut them and we put in a little bit of script. It was like one of the most moving stories that I've ever produced.

And that's like death on television. You can't watch people telling a story about something that happened a long time ago. Something about it just does not work. And we would try to produce these things, and we'd be watching them and we'd be bored out of our skulls. Because you just need so much more visual information than just watching people talk. So that was one of the big lessons. It made me realize, like TV, that's why reality television is so big. Like you can do it. You can produce a story from the past, but to do it you have to just fill – you have to give people something to watch. So you have to invent an entire visual story to go along with the story that the person is telling. And that's really expensive.

So if you look at like an Errol Morris documentary or something like that, where there was that one where he –

Tim Ferriss: What would be an example of one of those documentaries?

Alex Blumberg: *The Fog of War* was one that I [inaudible].

[Crosstalk]

Alex Blumberg: So that's the one where he interviews – who does he interview? What's his name? The guy from Vietnam.

Tim Ferriss: I haven't seen the movie.

Alex Blumberg: Okay. He interviews a famous general from Vietnam who was one of the ones who came under a lot of criticism. And it's a lot about what went on back then in Vietnam. And if you watch the movie now – and I watched that movie around that time, and I was like, “Oh, look at what he did?” Like he filled every second, every frame with like invented imagery that he had to invent and come up with. And it's so time consuming and so expensive. Versus –

Tim Ferriss: Sounds like Man on Wire.

Alex Blumberg: Yes, Man on Wire. Exactly. The same type of thing. And if you watch that movie now, they have to do so much work to keep the screen covered with interesting things to watch. Versus if you just take your average reality show where you've got two family members fighting with each other, that's the narrative crack in visual terms. Like we are hardwired to watch that stuff. And it's so much cheaper. You just turn the camera on and you watch two people fighting, and you want to watch it. You know what I mean? And so it made me realize that's why TV is the way it is, because that's what we want to watch.

We want to watch things moving on screen. So it was really hard. And so we had to think entirely differently. We had to think entirely visually. Like what's an interesting visual story versus an interesting audio story?

Tim Ferriss: Yeah. And I suggest anyone listening who enjoys reality television not learn too much about how it's produced because it will shatter the veneer. I remember I was talking to this guy who's worked on a bunch of reality shows you would recognize, and he said, "Have you ever noticed how many of the arguments happen with people standing up in the kitchen, and someone's always mixing something?" He's like, "Do you think that happens naturally?" I thought it was like: that's a good point. They are always arguing in the kitchen and someone's just absent mindedly stirring something that we never really find out about.

Alex Blumberg: Exactly.

Tim Ferriss: I wanted to come back to perfectionism because you mentioned you learn the benefits of working with a perfectionist – or maybe you said being a perfectionist. And you also mentioned The New Yorker so I had a chance, I was very fortunate to have the chance to study nonfiction writing for a semester with John McPhee, who is a staff writer for the New Yorker and just a phenomenal writer with the greatest attention to detail and structure of anyone I've ever met. But I'd be curious to hear what did you learn from working with Ira? What are the benefits of being a perfectionist or working for one?

Alex Blumberg: Basically what I learned is that a lot of it is just about the effort you put in, and it's not about – you have to have a creative brain, and part of it is that. You're just sort of born with – I guess partly

you're born with part of it, at least. But watching Ira work, a lot of times he just keeps thinking about it longer than other people keep thinking about it, and then eventually he comes up with an idea that's good. And it just made me realize like that's how people get to good ideas is they go through a lot of bad ideas first. And that there's not really – like occasionally a good idea comes to you first, if you're lucky.

But like usually, it only comes after a lot of bad ideas. And so what being a perfectionist is is sort of just like putting in a little bit more time to think through the level one or the level two ideas and try to get to something that's a little bit deeper. And I think that's why we do as many edits as we do. Because often what happens in an edit is you'll take a bad idea and you'll make it into a good idea over the course of several edits. And you'll have an idea that's in a script that's sort of like just getting you from one point to another point. And then you'll be like: you know what this is like? It's like this, and you'll come up with a good metaphor.

And then you'll be like: that's a good metaphor to put in this part of the script; it will really make it sing. And then eventually you'll get to a part where you're like: oh, it feels like a revelation will now happen at this point in the piece, whereas before it was just moving from one thing that happened to the next. So I learned that.

Tim Ferriss: Are there any examples of – perhaps from Startup or Reply All, but it could be from previous shows – of a specific bad idea that was turned into a good idea, or that became a good idea?

Alex Blumberg: Yes. It happens every single time. I'm trying to think of one that I can share that's easy enough to explain. Let me think for one more second. I don't know. This might be hard to do.

Tim Ferriss: Sure. We can come back to it. Feel free to pick up where you left off.

Alex Blumberg: Yeah, let me think about it for a second. I can come up with an example for you.

Tim Ferriss: Are there any habits that you picked up from Ira or the This American Life team otherwise that you still have? Any particular working habits?

Alex Blumberg: Good ones or bad ones?

Tim Ferriss: Either or both.

Alex Blumberg: The good habit that I picked up is sort of like being committed to excellence. That is something I learned, and I learned it from Ira. Like I think he really just hated to have something go out when it could have been better. And if he had an idea of how to make it better, he would almost always try to make it better, and still does. That was – and I was not that way. I was sort of like the kind of guy who was like, “Yeah, it’s good enough.” What I realized is that – but that was sort of – I think being that way is a little bit of a dodge or a rationalization, or an emotional thing you do to sort of like not actually try to make things good.

Because trying to make things good is scary, and you might fail and people might say it sucks. And we all know that so we all find our ways of rationalizing it, and that’s what I was doing. I was like, “It doesn’t matter; it’s okay.” And so working with Ira, I was like: this is a guy who really cares about making it good. And of all the things to care about in the world, that’s one of the better ones, just to really to make something excellent. There’s a lot of things you can care about, and that’s a good thing to care about.

So I learned that from him. And there’s a certain comfort with crisis that he had that I’m afraid wore off on me, also, that I don’t think is a good thing. I think that’s a bad thing.

Tim Ferriss: Any particular moment come to mind?

Alex Blumberg: Just the show was always like – for the entire time I worked at This American Life, it was always like up until the very last minute, it was getting produced and edited. It was always – you would be shocked – probably like 20 to 30 percent of the time, you were like: is it even going to go up? And that’s crazy, over like 15 years –

Tim Ferriss: That’s a lot.

Alex Blumberg: – to be like 20 or 30 percent of the time, are we going to make it this time? And then at a certain point I was like: oh, yeah, we’re always going to make it, because we always make it. But still, it’s always like right up until the last minute. And it’s better now, it’s way better now. They’ve got processes in place and stuff. And part of it is just audio is real time, so even if you’ve been doing it for a long time, you just can never quite get your head around how long it takes. But part of it is just sort of like he’s comfortable with

that. And I think in a certain way, it focused his mind, I think. And I think it also focuses my mind, I think.

Like I've noticed myself doing – like this episode, recently. I'm the one who's writing it and I've got a whole bunch of other things that I have to do on top of writing the script for this week's episode. And it's like I sit down and I try to think but I'm worried about this thing and I'm worried about that thing. And in the back of my mind, in this bad part that I learned – I think – is – but it'll – I still have Monday morning at 5 a.m. I'll just get up early. You know? I still have that in the back of my mind. And at that point I'll have no choice and I will have to make it good, and so I'll just leave it until that moment. And that's not good. And what it does is it drags everybody else into your crisis.

And so Kaitlin, my producer, is dragged into my way of managing my time and my way of trying to make things good. And I don't think she likes it. And I didn't like it when I was a producer. Like I felt like why is he saving everything until the last minute? And I'm doing the exact, same thing to my staff now. That's because I learned all those – I had 20 years of learning: yeah, it always comes out. It's fine. But it's bad, you know?

Tim Ferriss:

Yeah, I've learned that – developed a similar level of comfort with crisis and last minute turnarounds. And from personal experience learned the hard way that that is a very fast way to burn people out who haven't been conditioned, and how you can lose really good talent, unfortunately. The commitment to excellence, are there any stories that come to mind? A particular time, for instance, you passed something on to Ira that you thought was good enough and he was like: no, not good enough, and gave it back to you? Did that happen?

Alex Blumberg:

All the time. Like every single thing I ever read or did was – this is not an exaggeration: I don't think anybody ever in the history of This American Life has ever had this happen where they'll read a draft, even if it's the second or third draft, and the answer is: all right, it's all done. There's always a new tweak and there's always something that can make it better. And often, there's like big thoughts. And again, in the beginning it would sting a little bit. And it would be like; God, I just want to do one thing where it's done and I did it right. I took it really personally, like I'm not doing it right.

And then it was only over time that I realized that nobody does it right. The first draft always sucks, always, for everybody. And

you just gotta get over yourself a little bit. It's not about you and your ego; it's just about trying to make it better. And then I realized it was like that's really useful to have that muscle, sort of like I trust myself enough that I'm not a complete idiot. But that it's always – you know, and I can be made better by other people's input and ideas. That's essentially what an edit is. And it's also a really good way of going through the world, is to try to be open to what people are telling you.

So that was a really – I think that's – the commitment to excellence means being comfortable hurting people's feelings and being comfortable having your feelings hurt. And to try to take the feelings out of it and just talk about what the thing you're trying to do is. That was really useful to learn.

Tim Ferriss: And would Ira ever just say: this isn't good enough; give it another shot? Or was it always very specific feedback?

Alex Blumberg: It was always very specific feedback. Always very specific. Not do it again better. And that's also I think what being a good editor is. Because he was such a master of the form that he could tell you what was wrong, and he could tell you this isn't working for this reason. And often it's like really stupid little things. So for example –I can give you an example of this. From this current episode of Startup that we just did, it's all about burnout and basically we made the stupid decision to – it's coming out today. I think it'll be up by the time this posts so you can click and listen to it.

But basically we had this situation where the hosts of Reply All work working – they were working late every day for weeks. And this was over the holidays when we made the stupid decision to try to put up a show on Christmas and on New Year 's Eve. I don't know why we didn't take the week off, but we didn't. I think we felt like we were just new, we were just starting so it was too early to take time off or something.

So they were crashing, trying to get these shows up on Christmas Eve and on New Year's Eve and the shows weren't coming together very well, and they were just working really, really late. And then Lisa started recording conversations with them about how they were feeling. They were feeling super burned out and it was really good, it was really good tape. And so that's what the episode is about. And we were scripting the episode and I started by – this all happened – it came to a head when I was out of town. I was in San Francisco where my wife's family lives. And we

brought the kids out there over the holidays. It was supposed to be sort of a vacation but I was basically working the whole time.

But there was a day or two that I didn't work. And so I started the story by saying all this happened while I was on vacation. It was just like one line. But that one line put this whole – and the story was pretty good, and we were just telling the story and we were playing all this pretty entertaining tape of people talking about how burnt out they were and how their whole feelings about their jobs had changed. It's all very real, very raw, very entertaining. But something about me saying that I was on vacation had this whole scoldy tone all of the way through it.

Which was sort of like I leave for one day and the whole place goes to hell. Which was not intended at all, but it had that feeling. It sort of cast the entire episode in this unpleasant light. And so that's what I'm saying. We were doing these edits and we were like this should be good, like the tape should be good but we weren't listening. We were like – I had this – I don't like it. It's making me feel bad, not good. And it wasn't until I was – one of our other employees put her finger on it. She's like: it's that. That's the thing that's making it feel bad is that – just that line in the beginning where you just sort of – it colors the whole way you're hearing this thing.

And so we just re-crafted the beginning to be about like this transition in a startup's life where you go from trying to raise the money to all of a sudden you're running the organization. And they're two totally different jobs. And like this is an episode about how we were trying to manage the second phase of actually running the company and dealing with our own employees. And so that gave it a much better context, basically, to listen to the story in.

Tim Ferriss: How far into the episode did you put your finger on that and fix it? So from the first kind of pitch meeting or decision to make the episode about burnout, what amount of time elapsed before you were like: oh, that's – this issue we need to fix.

Alex Blumberg: It was probably like – we did this edit and we actually put together a rough mix, which we all listened to over the weekend. And that was the one where we were all like freaking out because it wasn't working at all. And we were like: oh, my God, this is a stinker.

Tim Ferriss: And the rough mix is like missing music, it's just a bunch of tapes strung together?

Alex Blumberg: It was a little bit more than that because we had a really good guy doing it. But yes, it was like a – the levels weren't all mastered and everything like that and we knew that we were going to come back –

Tim Ferriss: Do you do like scratch audio for the script as well, or no?

Alex Blumberg: We had recorded the script. So we had done the whole thing. This was actually more work than we normally do. Normally, this would have been the second edit but we were sort of behind the guns. We were like: well, maybe this will work. But it didn't. So it was essentially like a second edit. And we did the second edit and we realized that it wasn't working. And then it was over the weekend, basically, that we were thinking about it. And then this morning was when we sort of – like I came in and rewrote the top based on notes that Sarly had given me last night at 10.

And there was a couple other things that were happening in the episode that were also sort of like robbing it of its power that we changed, as well. But yeah, it was probably like a couple days of sort of like sitting and thinking with it. That's the other thing that I learned from Ira also about excellence. Like excellence is just tricks. It's just managing your time and your expectations. Because there's this panic where you do – like when I first heard the rough mix, I was panicked. Because it was like: this is bad. This is a bad show.

But then I had to remember like okay, you thought some part of it was good in the beginning and you have to go back and remember what was the part that was good. And there's some reason that something that was good has now become bad. There's something that you're doing wrong that you have to fix. It's not a crisis, you know what I mean? It's just sort of like it's a problem to solve. It's just hard to remember that sometimes. And I think that's what – with experience, you start to realize.

Like you've done it enough times. Like you've taken something that was bad and you've made it good, that you realize it's not the end of the world. It's not even something that can't be fixed. Because that's the feeling. You feel like oh, my God, there's nothing to be done. Like the thing that I thought was good is bad.

Tim Ferriss: I'd love to ask just a few more long form questions, a couple of fast ones and then we can wrap up. But I want to talk about turning a bad situation into a good one. Very specifically, I'd love to chat

about Startup episode number 9, “We made a mistake.” And sort of about being attacked and villainized. So maybe just for context, if you could explain to people what that mistake was. And then I'd love to dig into that a little bit.

Alex Blumberg:

We do these ads on the show. We have two ads in the middle of the show. We produce our ads documentary style. So what we do is we just try to interview people either in the company or users in the company about their own real experiences, and we turn those into little 45 to a minute long segments as our advertisements. One of our sponsors was Squarespace, the website company. And what we were doing is we were talking to different Squarespace users about their Squarespace sites. And we'd found this kid, this lovely, charming little boy who had a Squarespace site that he used for mine craft.

And we had done this interview with him and it had been lovely. And then we put it up and we realized that we had never told him or his mother that it was for an ad. We had just – and she had the impression that this kid was going to be on *This American Life*. That her son was going to be on *This American Life*. And then she heard from a friend that it was actually used in this ad, and then she got very upset and she went on Twitter and was talking about it on Twitter. And she had a large Twitter following and so a lot of her Twitter followers were upset as well.

And then we started digging into the details and it was like a little bit even worse because it turned out that the email we had sent to her had given the impression that I did still work at *This American Life*, which made it seem even sleazier. I don't know, it was like a really bad screw up on our part that seemed to her quite logically and rightfully that it had been on purpose and an intentional deception.

Tim Ferriss:

I enjoyed the episode for a host of reasons, first of which is we all make mistakes, the second of which is how quickly things can spiral – or seemingly spiral – out of control with the internet and social media and how much of a crisis it can seem like. And just like you working as a producer, I've been sort of on the front lines online for a good period of time, now. So when someone's like: oh, this parody piece came out about your book in the *New York Times* and now I'm just like: huh, interesting. I guess I should take a look at it later this afternoon. I don't have the “oh, my God, the sky is falling, everything is over,” response. Not always.

Alex Blumberg: Which we very much had. I definitely realize that now. And there was a couple people who were sort of visiting the office around that time, and they were like, “We think you're overreacting.” Which we definitely were, I think. But it definitely – it did feel like the company was so new and so young and – you know, we've managed to do this thing which I wasn't sure I was going to be able to pull off, which was to document making all these mistakes and still have people along for the ride with you, you know what I mean?

Tim Ferriss: Right.

Alex Blumberg: Because a lot of times when you make mistakes, you're not at your best; you're at your worst. Your unpleasant side or the part of you that's sort of a dick or whatever is coming forward. And to sort of air all that and still have people sort of on our side and supporting the company and supporting the show, we felt like we were already walking a tightrope and this felt like this was gonna be the thing that knocked us off.

Tim Ferriss: Definitely. And what I was curious to ask you is, as someone who's been on the documenting side for so long, looking at different situations, documenting other people's lives, perhaps painting them not in a negative light but in a neutral or comprehensive light, if you went back to, say, interviewing people and covering people for hard hitting news or something like that, has your viewpoint changed or your feelings about that?

Because a lot of journalists absolve themselves of the damage they might do to someone if it gets a lot of clicks or a lot of views or a lot of listens. I know that This American Life is – at least all the episodes I've heard are very constructive. I'm just wondering how you're feeling about – how your feelings as a journalist or documentarian changed as a result of becoming a target yourself.

Alex Blumberg: I think I definitely have changed from where I was in the very beginning when I first started. I was never like a “gotcha” journalist. I was never out for the expose. And at This American Life in particular, that's one of the other things that I think I learned a lot from Ira is that he really didn't – like he didn't want to just do the story where you didn't get the comment from the person who was supposed to be the villain in the story or whatever. Like he really was trying to understand everybody's point of view. And that's what makes that show great, and I feel like that was an amazing lesson to learn.

In the beginning, I didn't take it as seriously as I do now. I don't think I've ever left anybody – there's one story that I regret, where I was doing – it was a story about testing in North Carolina, about standardized testing. I interviewed a bunch of people in North Carolina who were sort of pushing this pretty heavy standardized tests thing in the state. And I ended up interviewing one of the main guys who was behind the testing thing. And it got into this really testy interview – testy in a bad way, not about testing – and I think – and he accused me of having an agenda.

And I did. I was a teacher. I didn't like standardized tests. And I told myself at the time that I was an open minded person. I was trying to do this in an open minded way. But I think looking back on it now, I would have done it differently. I would have tried to find every side of it instead of just trying to tell the side that I wanted to. Which isn't to say that you don't – if you have a point of view that you believe to be true, you can't tell that point of view. But it's always a better story when you're trying to understand the other side. And in fact, the other – yeah.

So I feel like now that I am – getting it back to your question of being on the other side of this whole Twitter thing, that's how I felt. I felt totally misunderstood and people had not bothered to find out what had gone on with me, even though – I mean I didn't feel misunderstood because I felt like once I understood what was going on, I totally got why they thought what was happening was happening. And it did look really fishy so I get it. But you do feel like: wait, this is just a mistake and there's no way to convince people of that. It's really scary. And so yeah, so I have a lot of– I see that happening in the news a lot, I think. Where journalists sort of take it out on somebody.

Tim Ferriss: Oh, all the time.

Alex Blumberg: There's another story there.

Tim Ferriss: Definitely. I made a decision early on not to attack people on my blog, for instance, which was really the first sort of property that I focused on. Partially because I felt like to attack people and tear things down is kind of cheap applause; it's going for cheap applause. It's like doing a bit on George W. Bush with a series of jokes as a standup comedian. It's like okay, like at the worst point in his presidency, it's like of course you're going to get some claps but it's like you can do better than that. I'd love to – I've been just very impressed with these shows that you've done so far. I really look forward to what's coming down the pike.

But I'd love to ask you some rapid fire questions. And by rapid fire, it just means I'm asking them in short form but you can feel free to expand if you'd like. Is there a particular book, or what is the book that you've gifted to other people most often? Given as a gift.

Alex Blumberg: Oh, man. God, I don't even know. Here's the horrible thing. I am so bad now about reading, and I blame my young children, which is also bad. But seriously, ever since I had two children, so I have a 2-year-old and a 4-year-old and I'm doing this job now. And my wife has this really demanding job. And we just literally have no time to read. So to me, books are almost oppressive because all they are are just sort of guilt and reminders that I don't have any free time. I don't even see them as gifts anymore. All I have is negative associations with them.

Tim Ferriss: They're homework assignments.

Alex Blumberg: I just feel guilty and sad. And I've heard that that changes. It's funny. I had this experience yesterday or two days ago where I had a free moment and I read something that a friend of mine recommended on Twitter. And it was this blog called *The Tusk*. And it was this really lovely essay about this woman who was working in San Francisco, and it was the first real sort of like time that I had sat and done the thing I love doing, which is reading a really nicely crafted piece of writing.

And I was like: oh, maybe things are starting to turn, now. And it was just so foreign. I hadn't done it in like four years. I was like: okay, I think I'm going to start to be able to get my life of the mind back soon. But like it's one of the more ironic things about – or one of the more paradoxical things about producing all this content is that I don't – my diet of what I read and listen to myself has just gotten so shriveled. And that's so sad.

Tim Ferriss: Does any favorite documentary or documentaries come to mind?

Alex Blumberg: Yes, documentaries are an easier answer. I loved, loved *Man on Wire*. That was one of my favorite things that I've ever seen. Oh, you know the book that I read, though? There was a book that I read that I thought was just unbelievably fantastic, which was called *On the Run*. And it was by Alice Goffman. She's a sociologist. Basically she ended up living in this black neighborhood in Philly. She's a white sociologist. She ended up

living in a black neighborhood in Philly for like ten years. It started as a sociology assignment and then just became her life.

And she became friends with these three guys who lived in the neighborhood and had rap sheets and just fully – just sort of like – it's this book that I haven't read before. She totally lived life through their eyes and sort of internalized everything about what it was like to be sort of like a poor, black man in Philly in sort of an increasingly police presence neighborhood. It was just devastating and amazing, and it just made me understand everything that's happening in the country in a different way.

Because I, like a lot of white people I think had this feeling of like however you feel, there's always this feeling of like why – you know, like – well, whatever. It was an amazing book.

Tim Ferriss: Great. *On the Run*. All right. Wrote that down. When you think of the word – when you hear the word successful, who's the first person who comes to mind and why?

Alex Blumberg: Yeah, success is a funny thing. You know, like Barak Obama is a very successful person. I feel like when I think of success, I feel like there's two layers of success. There's the sort of outsized success that is we're amazing people who I feel like are – like have skills and abilities far outside my own, succeed. And you know, sort of like Barak Obama is like that, and sort of like how did – you know, how did that guy become president? Like somebody sort of like Bill Clinton, same kind of thing where you come from – you know, not a background of privilege necessarily and you're just – you've got these oratorical skills and you do – you know. So that's one thing.

But then other – you know, there's other people who just sort of like have managed to carve out a nice life for themselves, which I feel like also is just sort of like – is success – where they have like – you know, they have people that they love and they have – you know, they have friends and family nearby and they've arranged their lives so they have time to actually take pleasure in the things that give them pleasure. And by that standard I'm not very successful myself. Like I worry about that.

Tim Ferriss: Who would you like to emulate more? Are there any particular people in your life or people you know of that you'd like to emulate to carve out the life that you want for yourself?

Alex Blumberg: I don't think about that stuff very much. When I was younger, I really wanted a mentor. I really wanted somebody who I could learn from and learn what my life would be like, and learn a skill and learn something that would give me meaning in the world. And when I started working at This American Life, that's what I felt like I finally got. I was like: okay, now I have a path that I'm on and I'm going to be on that path.

But once I was on that path, it was like now I'm just sort of like pretty consumed by it, you know? Who am I trying to emulate? I'm not really trying to emulate anybody, I don't think. Maybe I'm not being honest with myself. I feel like I have a very particular thing I'm trying to do and I feel like I'm sort of too busy with that thing and I'm too focused on that thing to look around for other people that I would be emulating here, you know what I mean? I've always been a little tunnel vision that way. I'm just like – I just sort of dive into the project that's before me.

Tim Ferriss: Now that you're a cofounder yourself of a startup, are there any particular founders or CEOs that you admire?

Alex Blumberg: Yeah –

Tim Ferriss: Who might not be the Barak Obamas in their respective fields. So not necessarily a Zuckerberg or someone like that, but someone where you're like: okay, that person is handling things in a way that I might want to at some point. Anyone who particularly impresses you or that you admire?

Alex Blumberg: You know, I don't know that many entrepreneurs. I come out of public radio. Most of my colleagues are still in the world of audio and I haven't met very many people. So I don't even know how to answer that question. The one thing I will say is the more I've started running my own operation, the more things that I've realized – the more things I like about the way – the more things I learned from Ira that I think are useful, from Ira Glass at This American Life.

He really was – the thing that he did really well is he made people excited about the mission. And he did that by caring about the quality of the thing we were putting together, and he made it feel meaningful. And I think that's really important. And so that's one of the things I've held with me. I think that was really important and I try to do that, as well.

Tim Ferriss: If you don't have any cofounders or CEOs, next time you're in San Francisco to visit the in-laws or the wife's family, we should put together a dinner of some type just for the hell of it. I think that would be a good time.

Alex Blumberg: Do you have people like that, that you're like: that guy's doing it well, or she's really got it going?

Tim Ferriss: I do, and one of them is a close friend of mine who was in your first episode. That's Chris Sacca. As an investor, I've been an early stage investor in a lot of companies like whether it be Twitter or advisor to Uber, etc., Evernote. And Chris was one of the very early mentors I had, and he's a close friend but he's also very, very good, obviously, at the early stage startup game. So it was really Mike Maples Junior, initially, and then Chris Sacca and also a guy named Neval Ravikant, who are spectacularly good at what they do. And they have a methodical way of dissecting certain types of problems.

I enjoy learning their respective recipes, their kind of algorithms that they use for evaluating things. Because they're all clearly effective but they're also sometimes very different, which I find fascinating. In the startup world, since I'm not – there are people – I have my own fledgling podcast, and then the blog, which is much more established and so on. There are people in the – and I don't really love the content creation label, but people in the content sphere, whether it be audio or written word or even video and television that I really respect a lot. I find what Morgan Spurlock does very fascinating, for instance.

He was kind of in front of the camera and behind the camera but now does both, including things that make him very much behind the scenes. So yeah. I guess I've been on my own – I'm sorry; go ahead.

Alex Blumberg: I know a couple of people who are working with his company and it seems like a great – he seems like he's doing a really great job running – making it a nice hub where cool things can happen.

Tim Ferriss: He's very good at establishing rapport with just any group you can imagine. Inside Man, I think it is, it's just incredible to see how quickly he can establish rapport with people. So I'm going to ask you perhaps the opposite of the word successful – not failure, but what's the first face that comes to mind when you think – and you're a very nice guy so this might be hard to answer. But what's

the first face that comes to mind when you think of the word “punchable?”

Alex Blumberg: Punchable? [Laughter] Oh, Tim.

Tim Ferriss: That could be your answer, too.

Alex Blumberg: I'm just trying to decide. I will tell you this. I feel like coming from – I guess coming from the nonprofit world, where I never had – this is my first full time job in the for profit sector, being the CEO of my own company, since I was –

Tim Ferriss: That's a hell of a way to start.

Alex Blumberg: And coming from the public radio world and the nonprofit world at large, like I do think there is a way that we conceive of ourselves as punchable in that world. That we need to be shielded from this world of profit, and somehow that it's dangerous and it's filled with people who will eat you for breakfast. That's like a gross exaggeration. Lots and lots of people in the nonprofit world are – this is a gigantic, gigantic over generalization, just so you know.

But I do think there's like a slight attitude that I ran into at public radio and other places that like – that we're shielded in this world from having to do – you know, like some sort of angry or sort of like – you know, macho or malevolent forces in the for profit world. And that's like – that's been one of the nice things – and who knows, maybe I'm going to get my ass kicked soon – and I probably will. And I'll be like: God, I wish I was still in the nonprofit sector or whatever.

But there's something about like just sort of going out and being part of this market economy in a really, really straightforward way that's freeing and doesn't feel like – it feels like the way it should be, and not scary. Does that make sense?

Tim Ferriss: Yeah, it makes perfect sense. I work with a number of nonprofits, like Donors Choose in New York, which is run really leanly, actually, very much like a for profit in that way. But the for profit world gives you some metrics that are very clear to play with, that I think can be freeing in a way because there's very little ambiguity about it.

Alex Blumberg: No, that metric thing was huge for me. It was like decisions – you make decisions – then you end up making decisions for all sorts of other weird, sort of arbitrary reasons like does the director like it,

or do our donors like it. Not like: do people like it? Is this something that should exist in the world, that people value enough to pay for?

Tim Ferriss: Yeah, definitely. Now, on that point, you've kind of not switched teams, it's not like they're opposing teams. But you've done a lot since you were first teaching eighth grade science, obviously. What would the old you say to the new you, or what would the old you think of the new you?

Alex Blumberg: The old me would think of the new me – I think it depends on which stage you go to. Going back to sort of the college and post college, like the old me would probably think the new me was some kind of sell out, maybe. I was never that strident, ever. But I was definitely more strident than I am now. And I definitely would have – I was definitely a little bit more suspicious of the profit motif when I was younger. So I would probably be like: what have you done with your life?

And the old me would also be like: you're an old man and all you do is let go and you have like these two kids that are just – I would have looked at myself with horror, I'm sure. I haven't seen a movie in God knows how long, I don't travel anymore.

Tim Ferriss: All right, one more question for you. If you could give your 20-year-old self one piece of advice, what would it be?

Alex Blumberg: This is going to sound corny, but don't be so afraid. I think I organized a lot of my choices based on sort of what I thought I could do, rather than what I wanted to do. And I did that because I didn't want to try to do the things that I wanted to do because I was afraid I'd fail at them. So I think I organized a lot of my life around fear for this first – that first decade after college. And I would tell myself don't be afraid to go out and just fall on your face a little bit more. It's all right.

Tim Ferriss: That's good advice. Alex, just in closing – I know you have to run – where can people find more about you, about what you're up to?

Alex Blumberg: You can listen to the *Startup* podcast; it's all right there. And that's at our website: gimletmedia.com. Both our shows are there: *Startup* and *Reply All*. And all sorts of stuff about our company and about me.

Tim Ferriss: Wonderful. All right, Alex, I will let you get going. I really enjoyed the master class. I will put tons of links and the show

notes for everybody, including links to the shows, to Gimlet Media, to the gear that you use in the field to creative live class and much more. So thanks so much for the time.

Don't forget this is a two part episode with Alex. And we are going to give you a sample of that next part, "The Art of the Interview," which is a class of his. It is fantastic. So we will give you a few minutes of that and please continue listening. But first, just a short word from our sponsors.

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Alex Blumberg:

So this is a story that was on This American Life awhile ago. And the setup is that it's this actor, Tate Donovan. And Tate Donovan was a sort of a character actor. He'd been on a couple different shows but he didn't get recognized very much. And then he had a stint on *Friends*, and all of a sudden he was starting to get recognized. And it was real exciting for him to get recognized because he finally got to be the celebrity that he always wished that he could be, the celebrity that he would have wanted to meet before he was famous.

So when he got recognized – and this story happens when one night he was out at this Broadway show, and a lot of people were coming up to him and being like, "Hey, I saw you." And he was

able to talk to people and be very magnanimous and say, “Thank you so much, it really means a lot.” And he was posing for pictures for people. At this show, it was happening over and over and over again.

Tate: I was exactly how I wanted to be. I was doing it. I was doing great. And then the kid with the camera came along.

[Music plays]

Tim Ferriss: This nervous kid, I don't know, he must have been 16 years old. He was in a rented tuxedo, unbelievably shy and awkward, and he's got like acne, and he's got a camera in his hand. And underneath the marquee is his date, who is literally like a prom dress. And she's got a corsage and she's really nervous and sort of clutching her hands and he sort of comes up to me and he sort of mumbles something like – something about a picture. And I'm like – I just feel for him. So I'm like, “Absolutely, my gosh, sure. No problem, my God, you poor thing.” And I go up to his girlfriend and I wrap my arms around her and I'm like, “Hey, where you from? Fantastic. Going to see the play? That's great.”

And the guy is sort of not taking the photograph very quickly. He's just sort of staring at me, and he's got his camera in his hand and it's down by his chin. And she's very stiff and awkward and I don't know what to do so I just lean across and I kiss her on the cheek. And I'm like, “All right, come on, take the picture. Hurry up.”

Alex Blumberg: Do you guys want to find out what happens next?

[Laughter]

Alex Blumberg: That's a story. When you want to – so what that is the power of a good narrative. So when I talk about – I'm talking about there's two basic things you're going for: emotion and narrative. We as human are hardwired, I believe, to listen to narrative. And it's a very simple – sort of the mechanics of a narrative are very simple. There's like a sequence of actions, and there's sort of rising action and it's culminating in something. And you were in the middle of that sequence of actions, and you were about to get to the culmination and I stopped it. And it's frustrating. And you really want to know what happens next.

And you would never, if you were listening to this, have turned off that podcast or that radio story at that moment. And that is a good

story. And that's why you want to operate in stories. That's why when you're interviewing people, you want to get their stories out of them and you want to get them talking in stories. Because stories are what we want to hear.

[Audio plays]