Yale Talk: Conversations with Peter Salovey

Episode 23: Reporting on a Pandemic

**Peter Salovey:** Hello, everyone. I’m Peter Salovey. Thank you for joining me for Yale Talk. My guest today is no stranger to interviews, podcasts, or radio. Her name and her voice will be familiar to many listeners. Yuki Noguchi is a 1997 graduate of Yale College. But you may know her from NPR, where she is a correspondent on the science desk. She’s been covering consumer health during the pandemic, everything from vaccine mandates to missed cancer screenings and mental health issues. Yuki, thank you so much for joining me on Yale talk.

**Yuki Noguchi:** Thank you so much, Professor Salovey. It’s an honor to be here.

**Peter Salovey:** I know our students in particular will be very interested in hearing about your career trajectory as a journalist. I know you started at The Washington Post, but you’ve been in NPR for a long time, since 2008. And tell us a little bit about your career and when you were at Yale as a student. Did you know you were going to seek a career in journalism?

**Yuki Noguchi:** When I arrived at Yale, I actually had no sense of career. Initially, I was a biology major. I was really interested in ecology and environment and I really loved biology, but I also didn’t really see myself spending a lot of time in labs. The vantage point of looking at the world through a microscope wasn’t really for me. So I felt pretty aimless when I arrived at Yale. But, my freshman year, I had the unbelievable blessing of being paired with five extraordinary women in my freshman year dorm room, all of whom were extremely self-directed. They knew what they wanted. They were pursuing it with methodical and relentless gusto. And I so admired them and every other aspect of how they carried themselves in the world. So while I had not yet found my thing, I sort of took a year off my junior year to figure all this out because I felt like my college years were going by too quickly, and I really wanted to figure that out. So what ended up happening during that year off is that I spent a year in Japan. It was at a language program that’s run by Stanford. During that summer, I ended up working at a Japanese wire service. I discovered I loved the newsroom. I loved the pacing and the urgency and the creativity of it and the authority inherent in shaping people’s understanding of what was going on in the world. But, I was a really bad writer. So I actually had a lot of work to do. But when I got back to Yale, after that year off, I switched my major to history, and I discovered how much I loved that, just the study of it. And I learned to think critically about the written word, about perspective and shaping narratives. I wrote for the *New Journal* that year and was really inspired by my fellow students who already knew way more than I did about narrative nonfiction.

**Peter Salovey:** So the *New Journal* is really feature writing more than newswriting, right?

**Yuki Noguchi:** Yeah, it mirrored what I was interested in history, which is narrative nonfiction writing. Also, at the time, there was only one journalism class taught at Yale by Fred Strebeigh. So I took that class and that was also in narrative nonfiction. And during the rest of my college career, I just applied to as many summer internships at newspapers as I could.

When I graduated, I ended up, after my last internship, I ended up at The Washington Post, my first real job, and I was still very green at reporting and still learning really about how to be a writer. And I had some really harsh bosses and, you know, at least one really great editor and lots of amazing reporter colleagues. And I learned a ton. I mean, this is the kind of job where you learn a ton on the job.

**Peter Salovey:** So things have changed at Yale. We now have a journalism initiative. You can take courses from Steve Brill and from Bob Woodward, and of course, Fred Strebeigh is still teaching and

Anne Fadiman teaches non-fiction narrative writing as well. I mean, there’s a lot more choice now than there than there was in the ‘90s.

**Yuki Noguchi:** Yeah, exactly. I’ve come to understand that. One of the sad things about pandemic was that I was just about to go to Yale to teach a seminar on radio writing that spring break. And then of course, everything shut down. So that’s been postponed. But I did learn that the English department has really expanded its nonfiction writing, which is great. I think that’s really exciting. So I had the privilege of meeting some students there during Fred Strebeigh’s ostensible retirement, which I guess is not really a retirement. Yeah, it’s great to see that.

**Peter Salovey:** Did you do any radio at Yale?

**Yuki Noguchi:** I did no radio at Yale. I did, in fact, no real newspaper writing at Yale. Then I went on to The Washington Post, where I covered business and then technology and eventually became an editor there. But I didn’t really love managing people, I discovered, and I really like to be close to the news. I think that, at least for me, I don’t tend to excel at things that I don’t truly love. So when NPR called, I was just eager for a different medium and a different kind of style of writing. And so that’s when I made the switch to radio. I still covered business. 2008 was right before the Great Recession. I don’t think we knew it at the time. These are things you know after the fact. But I covered business and then I started covering science when the pandemic hit. They say that reporters follow catastrophes. And so that’s what I’ve done with my career since.

**Peter Salovey:** Yeah, following catastrophes probably is not such a bad strategy for a journalist. And given your background in biology, it makes sense that you would gravitate towards science and medicine stories. So you mentioned covering health stories during the pandemic. Is there a story that stands out for you, one that was particularly meaningful?

**Yuki Noguchi:** I think what the pandemic has done has exposed so much of the inequities that we see in health care, and I think that has been eye-opening for me because, in the middle of the pandemic, we were also confronting racism and George Floyd and broadening the lens of public health to look at some of those social determinants of health, some of the disparities.

**Peter Salovey:** It’s been an important part of Yale’s thinking too. Our School of Public Health and School of Medicine, very interested in health disparities that Covid just brought out. I think of our professor, Marcella Nunez-Smith, who President Biden appointed to his Covid task force, and she is really focusing on disparities, working in the White House.

**Yuki Noguchi:** Yeah, I think that’s a good point, I think across the board in health care, that’s become such an obvious pain point in the system that it requires very fundamental, systemic rethinking. And so it is nice to see people really thinking about that.

**Peter Salovey:** Let’s talk about being a reporter in this era of Covid. Are there particular challenges that you’ve encountered through your work? Has something fundamentally changed in your sector of society?

**Yuki Noguchi:** My favorite part of reporting is the people, the intimacy of reporting. I cover consumer health right now. That’s a new beat that I started in January of this year. And it’s hard to find something more intimate than consumer health, you know, consumers’ relationship to their health and to their health care. And I’m always struck by how much people open up to me and the courage that people have to be vulnerable. Those are the stories that tend to touch people. And those are stories I love to talk to people about. I just so admire the way people do that. But it’s hard to go out and actually report. For a lot of the pandemic, I’ve been reporting remotely. Just logistically, as a reporter, you like being there. One way in which I think reporting is different with radio than in print is we try to create scenes so that people can have the sense of being there, getting the audio from the machines or the ambient sound that exists around you, the breaths people take between what they’re saying, there’s a lot of emotion in that, and it’s hard to recreate that over Zoom. As a reporter, you like to be able to wander around and see sort of what’s around you. And instead you’re sort of coordinating these meetings in a way that you have to stay in a designated spot and it’s restrictive. So, that dimension, the smells, the being there feelings, that’s really kind of what I miss. That’s the challenge, is having to try to recreate that without the benefit of being there. On a personal level, that’s difficult for reporting purposes. But we’ve found ways to try to circumvent it, and at least now I’m just starting to get out, so that’s reconnecting me to some of those things.

**Peter Salovey:** That’s great. We’re starting to do more in a public setting, too. But, it’s slow. Slowly, slowly, just to keep everybody safe.

As you know, I’m a psychologist. And in addition to being interested in emotion, as it happens, the other area that I’d be interested in is how do we communicate information about health and how we present information about health in a way that’s persuasive and that motivates people to act on it. Obviously, that’s really important right now. And I’m wondering if in your work you’ve learned any lessons about how to communicate during a crisis and, in particular effective communication about Covid and whether there are lessons that we might absorb here at Yale as we continue to try to keep people safe and healthy?

**Yuki Noguchi:**  That’s a big question. I don’t know if you mentioned it, but misinformation, I think, is also makes that difficult. I actually would be curious to see what your research found and how consistent it might be with today, given how information travels differently today. I think the one thing about public health messaging is the need for sort of simplicity and consistency. It’s hard when science changes as rapidly as we see it changing or rather our understanding of it. For example, when the CDC changed its masking guidelines and changed them back a couple months later amid the Delta variant surge, I mean, that was confusing, right? It was confusing for businesses or regular people. Personally, I saw that play out by creating additional chaos. Did we need to do that? Was there a better way to keep things simple? Obviously, that was balanced against the public health mission of trying to create incentives for people to get vaccinated. So these things are not easy. But, I think the message has sometimes been muddled in this pandemic.

The other thing about messaging that I think we’re learning is that has to be very personal. Health, as I said earlier, is intensely personal and intimate. And so the message also has to be that, has to come from trusted sources, you know, people that you might get advice from anyway. I think what we’ve learned in this pandemic is that sometimes means it has to be intensely targeted. It might require a deep understanding of the communities that you’re trying to communicate with and the different needs that they have. So a certain segment of California farm workers, for example, come from Mexico, but speak indigenous languages that are generally spoken but not written. So, posting billboards in Spanish is not relevant to them. You know, how to reach them really means knowing who the advocates in those community are that are the right people to get the message. So I think just simplicity and targeting with intimacy, I think those are the things that I’ve most consistently heard. But I don’t know, what did you find?

**Peter Salovey:** Those are very good lessons. And we also were very interested in what they call targeting and tailoring. We were looking particularly at psychological characteristics of audiences, people who like detail, people who like a simple message, you can get a sense of that with a few quick questions. And if this is coming over the computer, you can ask those questions in the context of the message and then quickly jump into a psychologically tailored message. Of course, targeting to the audience, your language example is a very good one. What we did not anticipate, I think, was the quantity of misinformation that’s out there. Anybody with a cell phone can pose an expert or even not as an expert and put information

on the Web. It’s hard to tell who is an expert and who isn’t anymore, and of course, there’s a distrust of expertise that has grown in recent years. I’m always reminded of that *New Yorker* cartoon from, oh, a couple of decades ago with the dog typing on his laptop computer. And he says, “you know, on the Internet, no one knows you’re a dog.” On the Internet, nobody knows who you are half the time. And information provided by someone who’s making it up as they go along looks the same to a user as information from Tony Fauci. And that’s a problem.

**Yuki Noguchi:** That’s a problem. And it’s also a challenge when our understanding of the science of what underlies a pandemic is also changing. So I think that leaves even more margin for misinformation or disinformation. But I would also say that chaos and misinformation to me seemed like a pretty rampant problem even before Covid. So I think, in a lot of ways, the political landscape, the disinformation landscape laid the groundwork for additional confusion when the pandemic began.

And being both a journalist and a science journalist in these times, it can be difficult when not just the facts of what you’re covering, but your profession, seems like it’s under fire a little bit. And it’s not unique to health or science, certainly. I used to cover business. And those were issues there, too. But you asked about sort of chaos or covering something in crisis, and I think the lack of predictability, the ever changing nature of things, especially at the beginning of the crisis, is incredibly hard. The way I approach a crisis at the beginning stages and then, after the initial stage, are sort of two different things. It’s hard when the data itself are still evolving and we’re all obviously living through the pandemic, even as we’re covering it, so I think there’s an inherently disorienting quality to that that was new, you know, living the news while covering it.

I think in terms of the beginning stages of a crisis, it sounds stupidly simple, but it is true, you really try to stick to the facts, the data, science, the numbers, and you try your best to stay grounded and make sense of that with the help of experts. When stuff is changing so quickly, you just kind of do the best you can to get the facts as they roll in. Even that is not always easy. As a practical matter, whether it’s the financial crisis or early Covid days, one of the challenges is that you work on a story, say, the night before, that might be airing the next morning. And then, something happens overnight, because these things are moving so, so quickly, like a bank would go under in the morning and by mid-afternoon, all hell breaks loose in the markets. And then by the evening, you know, there might be talk of a potential government bailout. So these things are very, very hard to track. Part of this is like, when you’re in the beginning stage of a crisis, it is kind of akin to news by Twitter. You try to take the quickest, most reliable data that you have and report on it in the most responsible way, which means often not reporting on things that that might be true. And just so you know, you try to really ground yourself in the facts.

But then pretty quickly, thereafter, at least what I try to do is step back and look at the longer view. So you can explain things a lot better by saying, OK, that was nuts, but here’s the background that led to it. Here’s why it happened. And here’s the kinds of historic comparisons we might be able to make. And this is what experts say it might mean for the future. You want to get to that stage of being able to contextualize what’s happening as quickly as possible so people understand those things like where we came from, what’s changing and why, and so that listeners can get a better feel for where we are and where we’re headed and not just the day’s news.

**Peter Salovey:** I think people forget that for a journalist, in particular a broadcast journalist, whatever they’re talking about is happening in real time. And even when sticking to the facts, the facts may change over time. Our understanding of Covid has changed over time. Everyone is trying to give it their best shot, even minimizing spin. I know when we communicate to our students, to say to them three days later, well, the nature of this virus has changed and we now have some new advice for you. It’s not always easy. And they can question our credibility. But it’s a reality here. It’s a dynamic situation. It’s organic. It’s not something in the archives where, we’re reading out something that’s been already played out, interpreted, understood, and now I can give you my read. It’s changing every minute of every day.

**Yuki Noguchi:** Yeah, and I think that is what’s difficult, because the public health messaging consistency is easier for people to understand. But as you say, your guidance can change and you want people to understand without sacrificing your own credibility.

**Peter Salovey:** You know, we saw that with masking guidance from the federal government early on where, as additional data came in, and as a deeper understanding of the nature of the crisis and the availability of protective equipment and thoughts about compliance on the part of the general public, they changed their guidance and that’s OK. We should be ready for that. But it is confusing to people.

**Yuki Noguchi:** Oh, one hundred percent. And I think, businesses, employers, schools were like, well, if the masking guidance is changed and some people are running around with masks and some aren’t, how are we supposed to know who’s vaccinated? There’s a science and then there’s how things play out socially on the ground, those policies. And I think those can be two different things. And they can be unanticipated consequences of shifting those guidelines, too.

**Peter Salovey:** Well, let me go back to Yale for the final part of our conversation today. I would imagine that there are Yale undergraduates who would love to be science journalists, who would so much enjoy working for an organization like NPR. What kind of advice do you give them?

**Yuki Noguchi:** Well, the way I grew up is so different than the kind of tools and outlets that you have today. Today you can be your own podcaster and record yourself. I would say, you know, much like I did, you know, experiment while you’re in school. If this is something that’s interesting to you, listen to podcasts, figure out what you like about a podcast or a radio piece and try to recreate that for yourself. One thing I wish that I knew as a young person, that I wish somebody had told me was, understand that you have a lot of power. That you have something to say and that there will be people who listen. Pursuing that in any way that you can see fit. Everyone has a story to tell and everyone can be creative about how they tell it. I think one of the things that’s really interesting to me about radio journalism versus print journalism is you can let the people speak for themselves and it adds a dimension to what you can do. Whereas, I mean, this is not a knock on words on paper, because I love words on paper, but you can really evoke things differently. And so just running around with a microphone and doing your own interviews. I would just start there. What do you find interesting and why and how would you tell that story? How would you convey that in sound? Those are things, I think, that are just at people’s disposal.

**Peter Salovey:** That seems like great advice. You’re triggering a childhood memory for me where my brother and I rigged up walkie talkies and broadcast over a shortwave radio that my father owned, you know, that we could tune to that frequency of the two of us interviewing each other. And it was kind of a daily radio broadcast that could fan out to all corners of our home. [Laughter] And as long as you were within the house, you could listen to this broadcast. But, it was fun to experiment. And of course, we were kids, but as college students, and as you say, with the tools available, there’s a much more of an opportunity for taking oneself seriously and seeing what one has to say.

**Yuki Noguchi:** Yeah, and I don’t know if you went back as a kid and listened to that and learned from that, but I still sometimes even after the story’s aired and there’s nothing I can do to edit it, listen to my stories and think, well, I could have said this better, I think would have sounded better. Thinking critically about your own work that way is another way to continue to learn.

**Peter Salovey:** Right. I do that with my speeches now. I’ll re-listen to them. And, it’s one thing to put them on paper. It’s one thing to say them, and then it’s another thing to hear them.

**Yuki Noguchi:** Yeah. Yeah, exactly.

**Peter Salovey:** So, Yuki, we were talking a little bit about the advice you would give to a student who might be interested in journalism, particularly radio journalism. But this is also a difficult time for students. We know they’re anxious. They’re depressed. The last year and a half or so has been like no other in any of our lives. What advice do you have for them to help them adjust and to help them get the most out of their college years?

**Yuki Noguchi:** Yeah, I mean, thank you for that question. I covered mental health last year for a period of time, and it was really striking to me that young people are really struggling in this pandemic. And it’s something I worry about a lot as a parent. And, as someone who really wants the world to see the young generation be healthy, strong and empowered. I think about the cohort of people who are struggling with anxiety or depression, the last year and a half make up a large percentage of their formative years, so it probably feels like an epic saga. And I remember as a young person not having the context for how any given period of my life would eventually fit into the rest of my life. And when we’re young, you know, the brain tends to keep you living in the moment more, and then the future can just seem like an extension of more of the same. And so I would say that I want them all to know that this will change because it just will. If it’s bad now, it won’t always be. What feels like forever isn’t.

**Peter Salovey:** Yeah, it gets better, right. It gets better.

**Yuki Noguchi:** Yeah. Life is just unpredictable and strange. There is no pain-free way through life. And I’m sorry about that. The pandemic derailed a lot of people’s plans and maybe young people’s careers. But I would encourage people to feel that they do have agency in their lives. Where can they plot their next step, if they do want to be a journalist or anything else? What can you do to lay the groundwork for that? What art can you make out of the pain that you harbor and play to the strengths of the pandemic, too. Work from a place you’ve always wanted to go or live in the forest because no one’s watching anyway. And so I think that, is there a way to find some way to make this day count and find a little bit of joy? Because life isn’t suspended or deferred. It’s actually going on right now.

**Peter Salovey:** These seem like really lovely bits of wisdom. And like you, I’m actually glad that our students feel no stigma attached to asking for help when they need it. And we are trying our best to provide it and provide it in easier ways. Pushing out helped to the residential colleges, establishing a Good Life Center at our new Schwarzman Center where students can just relax and be in a stress-free zone for a little bit, all seems very helpful. And, as you have said in this conversation, it’s also the people and the friends and the support you get from others that lift you out of whatever you might be feeling at the moment. Yeah, it’s important.

**Yuki Noguchi:** Yeah, yeah.

**Peter Salovey:** Well, my last question, since I shared a childhood memory with you, it continues in this nostalgic vein. When I speak with Yale alumni on Yale Talk, they often tell me something about New Haven that they miss and that they’d love to come back to our city and revisit. So what is it that you most miss about either the campus or our host city, New Haven?

**Yuki Noguchi:** Well, I mean, it’s really the people that I miss. To me, that’s the essence of community. When I arrived at Yale, I felt like, oh, yes, these are my people. And I’m really struck by every time I go back and I feel the same thing. I don’t know what the elixir is that goes into that. New Haven’s changed a lot.

**Peter Salovey:**  Yes, it has.

**Yuki Noguchi:** Obviously. And what I mean by that is that mix of people who don’t just excel at what they do and are intelligent and passionate about what they do, but also just the way they go about it. Like I said, I’ve met so many exemplary people who just find time to be well-rounded and to be good people and to contribute to their communities. I can still remember my favorite lectures and graduate student mentors. But I really learned so much from my peers. And I really miss my college roommates, Beth Chica, Sheila, Meagan, and Alegría. They’re just, they changed the course of my life and who I am. And I guess I just miss life at Yale. I often feel like I wish I could just go back to that period in my life and redo it. I think a perennial regret, even if I did redo it, would just be I felt like I was surrounded by all these extraordinary people who are doing extraordinary things. And we were all busy doing those things. And I always wished that we had more time for each other so that we could just influence each other even more than we did. That’s really what I miss is that era in life where you get to just be near people who are so influential and you’re so open to the world and shaping the way you interact with the world or how you think about the world. That, to me, is a phase that I’ve never quite been able to recreate in the same way.

**Peter Salovey:** Well, there’s a nice lesson in that for our current students. And I’m glad that you’re also having the experience that so many alumni have, which is even relationships that one didn’t have in college, you can you can kindle them or rekindle them, as the case may be, through alumni networks and reunions and just getting together, as you do every year with your freshman suitemates. That’s wonderful to hear that you do that. And that you’re now all so close.

**Yuki Noguchi:** Yeah. It’s been the great gift of life. Thank you so much for creating the environment that gives us that, for so many people.

**Peter Salovey:** And thank you for being a part of it. And thank you for talking to me today. I really have enjoyed our conversation.

So to our friends and members of the community, thank you for joining me for Yale Talk. Until our next conversation, best wishes and take care.