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# A word in your ear: how audio storytelling got sexy

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# A word in your ear: how audio storytelling got sexy

## **Abstract**

In a cultural milieu dominated by long-form television dramas such as *Breaking Bad* and *Madmen*, how has the apparently simple activity of audio storytelling gained such clout? In the US, documentary radio programs such as *RadioLab*, *This American Life* and *Radio Diaries* enjoy sold-out stage shows telling real-life stories that combine serious journalism with compelling personal narratives, philosophical discourse and an irreverent but always engaging tone.

## **Keywords**

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# The Conversation

A word in your ear: how audio storytelling got sexy

By Siobhan McHugh, University of Wollongong

In a cultural milieu dominated by long-form television dramas such as *Breaking Bad* and *Madmen*, how has the apparently simple activity of audio storytelling gained such clout?

In the US, documentary radio programs such as *RadioLab*, *This American Life* and *Radio Diaries* enjoy sold-out stage shows telling real-life stories that combine serious journalism with compelling personal narratives, philosophical discourse and an irreverent but always engaging tone.

The “new wave” of US radio often features at the hugely popular Third Coast International Audio Festival in Chicago. Julie Shapiro, curator since the festival’s inception in 2000, told me once, when I interviewed her, that “there’s a whole perfect storm” happening to make audio storytelling sexy: podcasting, ease of digital recording and production, and use of social media to promote and disseminate stories.

Shapiro coined Third Coast’s key tenet: “important radio can sound beautiful”. Such a view was a radical antidote to the turgid, formulaic reportage that had infected much of US public radio, whereby “documentary” had become associated with “worthy”.

## Movies for radio

The revolution gained traction in 1995 when the American radio personality Ira Glass co-founded *This American Life*, a one-hour narrative journalism show.

Glass refuses to use the term documentary:

Glass’s “movies-for-radio” approach has been a spectacular success, with more than 2 million listeners a week for *This American Life* on more than 500 public radio stations in Canada, Australia, Ireland, Germany and the US, and a further million podcasts on iTunes.

*RadioLab*, another cult hit, also employs a three-act theatrical model with a tightly-scripted spontaneous feel. Much of its charm derives from the riffing between the urbane Robert Krulwich and the musically creative Jad Abumrad, who interact in micro-produced, fast-paced stories loosely related to science, culture and philosophy, crafted as finely layered slivers of voice and composed acoustic.

“They’re playful ... they challenge how you’re used to hearing scientific topics, complicated things, talked about,” Shapiro told me. “But mostly it’s skill, chemistry and a little bit of magic, really.”

A recent RadioLab episode, *Blame*, features a deeply affecting tale about an elderly man, Hector, who develops a close relationship with the crack addict who raped and killed his daughter.

In print, Hector's story would seem unbelievable, almost perverted. As television, we would be drawn to the differences in colour, age, background, of the grieving white father and the jailed black murderer: appearance trumping story.

As audio, Hector's warmth is paramount:

I'm 86, almost 86 and a half: when you get as old as I am, you add the half again like you did when you were three.

As Hector tries to understand why his daughter died, writing letters to her killer, we listen, enthralled, as he reads both sides of an aching correspondence.

### **Driveway moments**

Even film-makers allow that audio, being less intrusive, can elicit deeply revealing content that film cannot: for his recent film *The Darkside*, Indigenous director Warwick Thornton used audio recordings because, in his view, "as soon as you put a camera in front of people, they clam up".

Besides facilitating the expression of deep emotion, audio engenders a visceral response in listeners, engaging both head and heart. This creates what radio producers call "driveway moments", where listeners can't leave their car because they're so caught up in a story.

I'm told I caused one such moment when an Australian journalist, Jan Graham, described the awful intimacy of a GI's last moments during the Vietnam war, in my documentary *Minefields and Miniskirts*.

When Jan's story appeared in print, and even when the same words were spoken by a very good actor in a stage adaptation, they were vastly less moving than the raw and wrenching emotion captured on tape. You can judge for yourself here:

### **Collective listening**

The Third Coast International Audio Festival boldly challenges the cultural dominance of movies by staging a Filmless festival, at which audiences gather just as in a cinema, for "screenings" of selected audio documentaries.

It's a powerful experience, akin to the charge of a live concert. Filmless has spawned spin-off events: in the UK, the In the Dark movement presents "sonic delights" at museums, cinemas, and pubs,

while In the Dark Australia sees audio devotees in Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide gather in churches, gardens and other atmospheric venues for collective listening events.

The whimsical, compelling personal stories of the US “new wave” are attracting young listeners in Australia. ABC Radio National has a long tradition of innovative audio – auteurs such as Tony Barrell and Kaye Mortley were making radio “movies” when Ira Glass was still a radio rookie.

ABC RN is fostering a crossover zone between audio art and radio journalism via its new Creative Audio Unit, whose recent recruitment drive for producers who can work across “genres such as features, performance, music, documentaries” attracted 85 applicants for one job.

Despite its long-predicted demise, radio ain’t dead yet.

*Siobhan McHugh is the founding editor of RadioDoc Review, the first international journal devoted to reviews of audio storytelling, which launches this week.*