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Abstract

Cutbacks at Radio National will downgrade the documentary, features and drama the network does so well. New storytelling content inspired by US radio innovators should complement, not replace this, argues Siobhan McHugh. On a study tour of the US last year, I interviewed key radio innovators including Jay Allison, founder of the sell-out live storytelling show *The Moth* and a seminal figure in US public broadcasting for over 35 years; John Biewen of Duke University Centre for Documentary Studies; and Julie Shapiro, the curator of Third Coast Audio, a lively Chicago indie audio forum.

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By Siobhan McHugh

Cutbacks at Radio National will downgrade the documentary, features and drama the network does so well. New storytelling content inspired by US radio innovators should complement, not replace this, argues Siobhan McHugh

On a study tour of the US last year, I interviewed key radio innovators including Jay Allison, founder of the sell-out live storytelling show *The Moth* and a seminal figure in US public broadcasting for over 35 years; John Biewen of Duke University Centre for Documentary Studies; and Julie Shapiro, the curator of Third Coast Audio, a lively Chicago indie audio forum.

All viewed Radio National's arts/features mandate and output with a mixture of admiration, delight and envy. Allison, despite his standing, spends the equivalent of one day a week fundraising, so parlous is the support for public radio in the US, where some 28 per cent of the population nominate Fox as their primary source of "trusted news and information".

Underfunded as it is, RN is precious, as are its best producers, whose sophisticated programs consistently punch above their weight — as their many prestigious awards testify. Yet under proposed new changes, some of RN's most distinguished programs and program-makers face cutbacks and even extinction.

The 2013 schedule will establish a Creative Audio Unit to showcase a Storytelling Movement modelled on US initiatives such as Allison's *The Moth* and Jonathan Mitchell's fictional/improvisational *The Truth*. Both formats could translate easily to an Australian context. They are relatively cheap to produce and could attract a new youth demographic to RN. But they should *complement* rather than replace or downgrade what RN already does so well: documentary, features and drama. As Allison told me, "one story form doesn't rise up and destroy the other".

RN programs such as *Hindsight* and *360 Documentaries* (where I am an occasional producer) tell mostly non-fiction stories that greatly enrich Australia's intellectual capital. Far from being elitist, this highly textured/researched format can reach people who might otherwise not know about important issues — you don't even have to be literate to "get" radio. But while storytelling on radio can be simple, it should not be simplistic; RN's documentary output remains enduring because, besides its insight, gravitas, inventive sound design and general elan, it does what any well grounded research should do: it fills a clear gap in knowledge.

I was commissioned, for instance, to record the first substantial numbers of "ethnic" voices on the ABC (migrant workers from the Snowy Mountains Scheme), the untold stories of Australian women in the Vietnam war and the neglected history of sectarianism in pre-multicultural Australia. The *collective* RN output in arts and features over many years represents a vital social, cultural and historical archive of Australian life. Yet this culture of excellence is now under threat, with "built" programs set to be effaced by panels peddling vacuous chat and opinion under the new Radio Lite.

There will be a net loss of eight positions, including two from Features shows Hindsight, 360 Documentaries and Into the Music. Surviving producers will have increased output, which will, I am told by Radio National staff, result in "a more superficial treatment of the ideas". The pleasing aural aesthetic will be diminished, as two sound engineer positions go. The richness of immersion or observational documentary will be unattainable.

I am currently making a 360 which will present a colleague's Bahasa-language anthropological research as very human stories of crime, punishment and magical thinking in Indonesia, thereby extending the ordinary Australian's understanding of this complex culture — surely an important issue, as we mark the tenth anniversary of the Bali bombings. But with no further ability to fund work in translation, future documentaries will be Anglophone — a grotesque limitation given our region and demographics. In Drama, three producers will lose their jobs, Airplay and other programs will be axed, and the fate of 39 slated productions and associated artists is unknown.

In a podcasting age, RN's specialist programs exert influence around the world, and can play a key role in helping the ABC to fulfill its mandate to educate and inform, and even extend democratic principles by disseminating rigorously researched documentaries and imaginatively produced arts content to listeners in constrained societies. In 2010 I witnessed a budding drama producer in Shiraz, Iran, revel in listening to Airplay when occasional internet access permitted (the BBC and American outlets were barred). To cut him and his ilk off from this artistic oxygen is to abrogate the democratic calling of the national broadcaster.

For the likes of Sharon Davis (four Walkleys) and Jane Ulman (winner of several Prix Italias — the "Nobel prize" of radio) to be facing redundancies, is akin to sacking David Simon (The Wire) and Vince Gilligan (Breaking Bad) for taking television writing to unprecedented heights. A Creative Audio Unit is not in itself a bad idea, and I like RadioLab, The Truth and This American Life as much as anyone — but let's not throw the baby out with the bathwater in rushing to ape US vogues.