Interview 2: Ezra Eeman of the European Broadcasters Union discusses how voice platforms and AI are changing listening

[00:00:00] So in this week of the class, we've been looking at some of the technological changes that have really been changing storytelling. Things like voice platforms that are bringing interactivity to the storytelling form, and while voice platforms have really taken off rapidly in the US and in some parts of Asia, in other parts of the world, it's been a bit slower. Sometimes due to issues with how the platforms handled the local language or the local dialect. In other places, there's some concerns about big tech and privacy issues. Ezra Eeman is the head of digital at the European Broadcasters Union, and he's been following changes in technology and how technological changes shape the work that Europe's broadcasters are doing. Ezra, thanks for joining us today.

[00:00:41] Thank you, Tamar. It's my pleasure.

[00:00:43] So being where I am in the United States, the land of the big tech giants, my perspective is really kind of colored by what's really happening here. From where you sit, what have been some of the biggest developments globally in audio storytelling.

[00:00:57] Thank you for inviting me to give some background. Well, Tamar, in all fairness, the big developments in audio storytelling are certainly very much influenced by what's happening in the US. The tech giants are global platforms, so what they launch in the US eventually ends up here in Europe as well, even if the launch and adoption is a bit more patchy here. So I would say the big developments are certainly and evolutions are very similar. In a broader sense, the shift away from live, linear, traditional broadcasting and listening to more on-demand audio, allowing for a broader spectrum of genres, the broader spectrum of topics, as well as more interactive, more sharable aspects of audio. And we've seen the same kind of interest and rise in podcasts and dedicated, nonlinear audio storytelling. And I would say the main shift here is also individual creatives are now able to to make productions that before they wouldn't be able and that were only done by big broadcasters. So there's a lot of experimentation, a lot of innovation with formats, delivering new technical capabilities that are in the hands of the crowd, I would say, and for European broadcasts, I would say the main shift, and the main big shift, is that it's from a broadcast to many it becomes a more intimate relationship. And it's where before maybe we were a bit over obsessed with the content and the perfection of that content, then making sure that it was reliable, and it was clear, and value-based is a bit more user- and customer-focused now and understanding how to enter in that relationship and shifting a bit away from big studio, big broadcast thinking to a bit more nimble and agile productions, which is is a new thing.

[00:02:49] So I would say that's the biggest shift, and it has helped us to address the current COVID crisis because suddenly we were out of these studios, and suddenly we were without the big material and all the the tools. And we had to start recording things in and in our houses and homes, and I would say the experience of doing more nimble productions and different ways of recording has helped.

[00:03:16] So in terms of voice platforms, because they're so fundamentally different from what we've done as broadcasters, where exactly as you said, it's that one thing to many. Not only is that we're one to one, there's that level of interactivity. I'm curious how big of a factor are voice platforms to the minds of broadcasters, and how much time and energy are they putting into creating for them?

[00:03:36] Well, it's been a few years now that they've been also around in Europe, but the numbers of the adoption in Europe is much lower than in the US. I think the US is around 35% of households that have those devices, but the highest numbers are in the UK are around 18% of households. And from there, it really goes down. So Germany is around 14%. France is not even 10%, so it's around 8 or 9%. The Scandinavian countries are around 5%, and the rest of Europe is non-existent because they're officially not even launched there.

[00:04:12] So that, I would say, where there was initially a lot of enthusiasm and the hype to explore and do a lot and put a lot of resources in there, is now a more pragmatic view, making sure that the basic things are there. And the basic things is ensuring that you have news briefings

on there, that your live broadcast is accessible there, even if it's through an aggregator. And from there, we see mainly podcasts, and here and there some interactive experiments for kids, audio storytelling for kids or little adventure games for kids, or here and there with language learning. These are some of the things that they're experimenting with, but the broad wave still has to come, I think, with a wider adoption.

[00:05:07] Yes, that sounds like a lot of the same types of things are being explored. I'm curious in terms of adoption, how much of it do you see as language is the barrier? How much of it is just there hasn't been the consumer demand? How much of it is concerns about big tech, and privacy, and some of the other issues that come along with devices in a house that actually listen to people?

[00:05:28] I think mainly language and entering the market. This is the main issue because you see that where there are more services available and the language isn't a barrier like in UK, adoption is higher, and it's really ramped up. Already, I think last year there was 11%. This year it's 18%. So the adoption goes much faster in these countries. It's just not available, and the quality of the service, the synthetic voices are a good example. The French in France is not the same as the French in Belgium, not exactly the same. Or even in Ireland, that was a problem that the public broadcaster there is called RTE, and the way you pronounce that in plain UK English is not the same as you would pronounce in Ireland. So people wouldn't be able to even start that specific broadcast channel or skill because the voice device wouldn't understand the commands. So I think there's a main limitation there.

[00:06:32] There are some concerns about privacy. There are some concerns about data, but more in the minds of the broadcasters and in the minds of the audience, I think certainly for those voice devices.

[00:06:44] Yeah, sell tell me a little bit about some of the concerns on the part of broadcasters, both whether it's data or whether there's some concerns about how this might the traditional mission of the broadcasting entities in Europe.

[00:06:57] Well, I think in the first place, and I guess it's the same for for NPR in America, the mission is there to inform, educate and entertain. And I would say now more and more to connect and see these devices as a new way to do it more intimate, more conversational, a new level. At the same time, these devices are in the hands and the whole software behind it, the whole device behind it, the API, is in the hands of big platforms, and there is a concern that there's a lack of editorial control, there's a lack of transparency as how the ranking works and what's recommended. And not certainly in the voice device, but there is there is almost no way to select from multiple sources. You really get what's surfaced by the device, and it's very untransparent how that happens. And there's a question like where does the data go? What kind of data do they collect? And all that is quite vague. And most broadcasters here don't have the bargaining power to amend their contracts with the big tech companie, so they have to sign the standard contracts. And I would say there is even some concerns about what parts of their broadcasts or their content is being repurposed or rearranged by the device. So the integrity of the signal, which is a very important thing here in Europe, making sure that what you broadcast, what you provide to the consumer, to the audience is the same at the end of the chain, as in the beginning of the chain, that's very hard to maintain in the voice device, where things are chopped up and delivered, maybe sometimes in a format that was pre-conceived by a tech giant. And they say, "Our news briefings work like this." So you have to provide something that works, and you will come in and train and other things. So I think a lot of broadcasters are struggling with that lack of editorial control.

[00:09:08] And how has any conversations with the tech platforms gone, or are there things you're doing to try to help with some of those concerns?

[00:09:18] Well, the good thing is, and that's why we as EBU, we try to bring together all these concerns, so we a lot of smaller broadcasters, but we also have bigger broadcasters like the BBC and Radio France. But by sharing the concerns together and bringing them together to these big platforms, we have some weight, and we can actually engage in a dialog with the product people.

[00:09:43] But as you know, there's also commercial concerns and other things that they have to take into account, and it's not because we bump something up on the product line that it's directly changed. But we have a dialog, and I think more than before, there's a sense that they need to have that dialog with us, where before they felt less of a need. Now, public service media, the importance of public service media, and in times of crisis, makes that there is more attention to listen to us. And the second thing is, maybe it's a bit of a carrot and stick approach, is Europe is very active on the policy and regulation level, and there's upcoming new regulation in the pipeline. And all these platforms know that the discussions are happening now, and they're also shaped by public broadcasters. So whatever we bring to the table as concerns that are not solved in direct conversations will be concerns that maybe have to be solved through policy and regulation. So, yeah.

[00:10:50] We've been talking in the class a lot about how the tech companies really see both mobile and then obviously voice platforms as fundamental shifts in computing technology. I'm curious from where you sit. Obviously there's some benefits, and this is a big change that the tech companies definitely see as a big force in computing coming forward, which means it's likely a way people are going to be consuming more and more and more content. Where do you see the sort of the risks and rewards to that?

[00:11:17] Well, for me, the rewards are very much that the seamlessness of the natural conversations tied and having media that really feels close and personal. I think there is the advantage, and I think in the future with natural language processing, this will become even more natural because now there's still a lot of construction needed behind the scene to make a question and answer actually work on a voice device. I think that will improve rapidly. I think that the main concerns are everything we don't see to make this happen. The machinations behind it, and concerns maybe also of losing that sense of community that sends off. So the more individuals we make things, the more tailored, maybe the less communal they are, the less community based they are, and I think public broadcasters still have in their mission also to connect communities, even more, I guess, in these times, where we'll be more confined to our houses.

[00:12:26] And where do you see audio storytelling going now that we have all kinds of new digital platforms, including voice platforms? I'm curious, you know, what do you see as the exciting next thing that may be coming down the pike?

[00:12:38] I would say...so what we see is that, voice, we had a dedicated group around voice devices called the Vox Group, and you've been there to talk to the group as well. You see, that group is kind of almost naturally disappearing because voice becomes an interface for everything, for the home, for the car. So it's more about the assistant, almost, like the voice assistant or voice as an interface, and I think the next level is where this becomes almost a natural part of the environment. So where translation or text to speech or image to speech will make it possible that computers auto generate almost stories. Yeah. So we're now...There's been a lot of work around atomic content, so where you would chop a broadcast or a story in different segments and then it would be able to replace these these little parts, so they would be more personal narrative. I think in the future, all that kind of very meticulous editing won't be necessary anymore because a computer will be able to read texts, to reassemble sentences, to maybe guide you in a different part of a narrative when it feels you have a different environment. So all this more seamless generating of a narrative almost will certainly happen. So I think more synthetic generation of stories, which is maybe a frightening thing when stories are generated by computers based on information given by editors.

[00:14:28] I think the other thing will be then that there will be a need for a much more authentic voices as well. People will know that this is a synthesized story, synthetic voice that's been generated by a computer, and we'll take you wherever your fantasy might lead you. On the other hand, this is just plain old, you know, Mr. X, Ms. Y taking you through to today's events. And, you know, this is a reliable human voice telling you a human story.

[00:14:58] That's so interesting. Yeah, I could totally see that causing a backlash toward the authentic voice. I think it also may open up new skills that would be needed in journalists who

know how to provide the editorial input to the computer so that it makes decisions that actually have editorial integrity. I can see that being a really tricky area.

[00:15:16] Absolutely. Yeah, I think we don't know. So if now that...One of the examples I saw last year was Tag X, it's a story from BR, and it's the end of the world. And you as a listener, you wake up, there has been a huge event. And you wake up, and you're being asked questions. And depending on how you answer these questions, you might save the world. The forking behind that to make that narrative work is impressive, and it took lots of time. You can imagine that this will disappear in the future when computers can generate storylines based on your answer. So this is interesting if it happens in fiction, but what happens when you start seeing the same thing in nonfiction? When people want to know more about the events, and you start asking questions that lead you into fake news or misinformation or anything else. Is a generated nonfiction story by computer so reliable, and to what extent? What are the kind of confines that we give the machine to generate answers?

[00:16:39] And what kind of editors are needed to be able to do that? I think it could open up all kinds of interesting work in journalism to make sure there is that editorial integrity behind it, so it doesn't, like you say, become this fiction or filter bubble people or take people into misinformation. It's very interesting.

[00:16:57] Because it's how it works in on the internet now. People search things, and then even Google already says people also wonder this. You could use that as a way to dig deeper dives in the internet and end up in conspiracy theories because a lot of people ask, "Are there aliens out there?" If you have a computer start to lead you in certain paths, that might also end up in strange thing. But I think it's inevitable if I see the evolution that certainly machine learning and language pattern learning is taking. I do think voice will go there.

[00:17:43] There could be some big changes afoot. So most of the students in this class are interested in journalism, aspiring journalists wanting to do new and different things in journalism. For the students in this class who are interested uniquely in audio storytelling, what advice do you have for them as they think about what they might want to do in this field, and where things may be going, and what kind of niche they may want to find in their career?

[00:18:06] So, before I talked about the whole machine entering the environment of the storyteller, I think it's still good, original storytelling that will always be important. And I guess as complexity grows, the complexity of our society, complexity of our environment, we will need people who are able to break things down in stories that are digestible, that are understandable, be it fiction or nonfiction, and balance that. The learning curve might be how do you make it conversational? How do you make it something that's less of "I think this and I broadcast it to you" when there is potential for more conversational style of storytelling? And what happens when you have these changing environments. Does a car give you different new opportunites than the kitchen? What kind of services can you imagine that are linking storytelling with new technology and new environments? So think outside of the box, coming up with new ideas, new services around the, for me, the core values like informing, educating, entertaining and maybe connecting people.

[00:19:33] I see a lot of new, interesting things around connecting people with audio. I see these chat rooms purely based on audio, which I think is a very interesting evolution. So daring to explore things and being that bridge person that understands technology, but still masters storytelling. Because there's a lot of technology people out there, and there's a lot of storytellers out there. There's not so many people that actually can really bridge between the two. From all the broadcasters I've been working with, there's only a few key people that are really sitting that can help engineers make things that make better stories or that can help storytellers to really understand technology.

[00:20:27] Yeah, thank you. I think I think you've hit three really key points that we've touched on in a couple of places in this class. One being how audio storytelling is really an old form of storytelling, and it's just been very enduring, partially because it's been very adaptable. And then the sense that it really is so good at informing, entertaining and creating the sense of connection between people because it is the human voice at some level. It'll be interesting to see how potentially computer-generated voices may change that. But I think it still does have that

connective ability that you speak to. And third that sense of there's got to be people working kind of in between technology and storytelling, given where things are going, and that's such a, I think, a great opportunity for people who are both interested in stories and great journalism and also new ways of getting them to an audience. So I think that's very well put.

[00:21:16] Well, Ezra, thank you so much for joining the class. This was great talking with you.

[00:21:19] Thank you. It was a pleasure.