

Module 1: New technology launches an audio renaissance

[00:00:05] So audio has been around for ages, and it's proven itself powerful and adaptable over time. But why are we seeing a real renaissance in audio storytelling now?

[00:00:15] First of all, technology has opened up some new possibilities for the form. About every 10 years or so, there's been a big revolution in computing technology that's fundamentally changed how we live our lives. In 1977, computers were basically mainframe computers. They were big computers the size of a bookcase. They were used by researchers, and engineers, and businesses to process large amounts of data. Computers weren't something people had sitting around in their homes. But in 1987, that changed when desktop computers became a thing. At this point, computers were showing up in our homes. In 1997, those home computers got hooked up to the internet, and this is when news consumption started to change. Journalism organizations started to create online content, and RSS feeds and RSS readers became a way to get content from a specific publisher or about a specific type of content. Then in 2007 came the mobile revolution. We all started walking around with devices in our pockets that were hooked up to the internet and then connected up to our ears with earbuds. RSS feeds became a way to subscribe to audio files. That was basically the beginning of podcasts. And then in 2017, the voice platforms became a thing. Alexa, Google, Siri and other systems let us ask them to just do things, and they'd respond in words. These voice assistants became fairly common on kitchen counters and on tables near the den sofa.

[00:01:45] It was these last two revolutions that have really given new life to audio storytelling: mobile phones and voice assistance. For much of the recent past, audio storytelling in media has basically meant radio, but the smartphones really changed that. Suddenly we were walking around with those earbuds plugged into a device connected to the internet, and this ushered in that new way of listening to music and opened up the door to podcasts. This way of consuming audio became a huge business that newspapers, tech companies and even Hollywood now have a hand in. It's become a big part of how many people relax with a story before bed and get up to date with the news in the morning. We'll dive deeper into podcasting in week three of this class, but the important thing to know for now is that it played a huge role in driving the audio renaissance that we're currently seeing.

[00:02:36] Then 10 years later, in 2017, when voice assistance burst on the scene, now we could just talk and our voice assistant would do our bidding: turn on the lights, start the news, tell you a joke. You could say something and actually get back a response. All of this may be a bit awkward for some of us older adults, but little kids are now having conversations with these devices. We're going to talk more about this during week four, but the rise of voice assistance really does mark a fundamental shift in audio storytelling. That's because audio storytelling is often thought of as a lean-back media experience. You can listen and do other things like drive, exercise, cook and so on while you listen. With audio stories, you engage your mind, and it's something you can consume while you do something else. But the interactive nature of the conversations people are now having with Alexa, and Google, and Siri has made it possible for audio to be more of a lean-forward experience. In a world that's just become a lot more lean forward. We expect so many experiences to be more immersive, more interactive, and this is the new avenue audio storytelling is poised to pursue.

[00:03:44] All of this has caused a really big shift in the journalism landscape. For the first few decades of my career, most journalists wrote for papers or magazines, and if you didn't do that, you probably did TV or maybe documentaries. Audio storytelling was basically for radio, and it was kind of a niche sideline. But that's really changed. Terrestrial so-called linear radio transmitted on radio towers, or even internet streams of radio stations, are really starting to see their audiences fade away.

[00:04:14] But as we've been discussing, audio storytelling is really having a moment. In the past couple of decades, it's kind of seems like everyone has become an audio storyteller. The rise of storytelling events like The Moth, TED talks and so on, and the cultural force of podcasts has really meant that almost all journalists need to be audio storytellers. We might be called on to turn our journalism into a produced podcast, or maybe a radio segment, or perhaps we'd be asked to work with a producer to do that. Or we could be asked to regularly discuss our work on a

podcast, or radio show, or maybe from a stage. And to do so well means we need to be good audio storytellers, and it takes more than just holding forth about our work.

[00:04:57] Next week, we'll talk about what makes a good audio story, and definitely take some time to listen to my conversation with Julie Shapiro to learn more about why audio is so adaptable and so powerful.