

## Module 1: The power and adaptability of audio storytelling

[00:00:03] Welcome to the first lecture in our course. One of the hottest things in media is actually one of the oldest. So old it dates to the early days of our species. It's the not quite so simple art of audio storytelling. The craft is evolved over time, but its fundamentals are often the same. A story told through the human voice and taken in by the simple act of listening.

[00:00:26] Since the dawn of humanity, we've basically told stories. We gathered around the fire, and we shared tales. It's how we preserved our history before we started writing. It's how we taught lessons about life across the generations. And it's how we really ultimately defined who we were as humans. Revered figures have long been storytellers. Gritos, shamans, the gospels, poets. Hollywood's biggest names, of course.

[00:00:52] But throughout all the twists and turns and all the different ways our stories have been shared with one another, audio storytelling has persisted. The printing press didn't kill it. Television didn't kill it. And even virtual reality video games haven't killed it. So why is this cockroach-like form of storytelling been able to survive for so, so long?

[00:01:13] Well, it's both adaptable, and it's powerful. Adaptable because it can take so many different forms. It can be an elaborately produced sound rich podcast, or it could be a very simple story told to a friend one night over the telephone. But even a simple story can be remarkably powerful, and it really is powerful.

[00:01:35] I realized that early in my career, within a really short period of time, I went to see two stage performances. One was Miss Saigon. The other was a monologue performed by Spalding Gray, called Gray's Anatomy. Miss Saigon was truly a spectacle in all senses of that word. A helicopter at one point even descends from above the stage. Gray's Anatomy, meanwhile, was a guy sitting at a table. Okay, the table had a lamp on it, but still. A few months later, I realized I recalled really not much about Miss Saigon, but I had really rich memories of Gray's Anatomy because instead of watching a spectacle unfold around me, like it did in Miss Saigon, with Spalding Gray's monologue, he was just telling the story. And I did the work of imagining the scenes, the action and the feelings. And at its core, that performance by Spalding Gray was kind of just an audio story.

[00:02:27] See a story told through sound and a human voice really does almost have this power to take you anywhere – to all sorts of places, to different moments in history and into the lives of all kinds of humans from all sorts of experiences. And it's definitely a heck of a lot cheaper to just tell a story than to fly a helicopter in from stage left. And at a time of growing financial pressures on media companies, there really is this growing realization that audio storytelling packs a real bang for the buck. And it is a powerful form of storytelling because it's so good at giving us humans what we're yearning for from the media.

[00:03:06] In between jobs in public radio, I spent a bit of time in academia testing a media theory called Uses and Gratifications as a way to explain internet usage because the internet was new at the time. And as somebody who spent my career making media rather than studying media, I find the focus of Uses and Gratification helpful because it's really about understanding why it is that people are going to certain media forms to satisfy certain needs. And I found that helpful in my work creating content.

[00:03:36] At the risk of greatly oversimplifying the Uses and Gratification Theory, we basically turned to media for a combination of three main reasons: to be informed, to be entertained and to connect with other people. A good audio storyteller feels like a friend or a companion who's telling you about something you're interested in. Often in a compelling and entertaining way. And this is a big part of audio storytelling's enduring power.

[00:04:02] We'll explore more about why audio storytelling is powerful in a conversation with Julie Shapiro from the podcast network Radiotopia. Now, audio may have endured because it is so powerful, but that doesn't explain fully why audio is such a big deal right now. That's the question we'll dive into in the next lecture this week.