

Module 2: The fundamentals of audio storytelling

[00:00:02] In the last module, we were discussing why audio's really having a renaissance these days. Basically, it's a flexible storytelling form that can be really cheap to create, but it's incredibly powerful at transporting people into a story. And the two most recent revolutions in computing technology have created new space for audio stories. That being smartphones with podcasts and voice assistance that have opened the door to interactive storytelling. This week we dive into what makes a good audio story and how to write for the ear. We have two conversations with people who work with audio storytelling that I hope you listen to.

[00:00:37] First, Hannah Allam is a reporter at NPR who covers extremism. But before NPR, she was at BuzzFeed News. She's going to talk with us about how to make the switch from writing for the eye to writing for the ear. There's also a great reading this week about moving from print to audio, which I highly encourage you to spend some time with.

[00:00:56] We'll also talk with Ramtin Arablouei about sound design and soundscaping. Audio stories can be really simple, but he'll share the more advanced techniques for using, scoring and production magic to really make a story sound gorgeous. And we'll talk about some of the ethical considerations to think about when adding production to a piece of journalism.

[00:01:16] All right. Onto the focus of this week, the fundamentals of great audio storytelling. Now, you might think it's about great sound or having a really good voice. Or maybe the right recording equipment. But it's really not about any of those three things.

[00:01:32] For years, I've been looking at moment by moment data on what people do when they listen to stories and podcasts, measures of listening and measures of engagement or what we sometimes call love. We've been looking at when people decide to stop listening, when they mark a story is something they're finding interesting and when they decide to share it with a friend. We've learned a lot about what makes stories hold someone's attention and what causes people to decide to give up and listen to something else. What we've learned is that much of the time it really comes down to whether the storyteller is thinking about the person listening when we're telling the story. It's not so much about the audio equipment or the voice. It's really about are we connecting with them? Are we helping them understand why they should care about the story we're telling? Are we connecting the story with experiences they understand of the world? Are we being respectful of how much time they have to listen or how much time the story is actually worth? And are we being clear with them about what we want the story to really communicate to them?

[00:02:31] So the number one lesson that we've learned when we've been studying data about listening is that you really have to think about your audience. I'll share some more of what we've learned from studying NPR when data in the next lecture. But really, the first question to ask yourself, when you sit down to tell a story for the ear using audio is what is my focus statement? What is it that I want the person listening to this story to understand and to get it to take away and knowing that answer is the most important way to ensure that you serve your listener and that they have a great experience listening to your story.

[00:03:05] David Candow was an amazing storytelling coach who worked at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. He'd have journalists create a focus in the following form when somebody was sitting down to do an audio story. The form was, "someone doing something for a reason." See he believed that all good stories were about people. Stories aren't really about things, but they're about a person engaged in an action that has purpose, someone doing something for a reason.

[00:03:33] And once you have that, you have a really big jumpstart on the next thing you need to figure out to have a great audio story. And that's what voices need to appear in this audio story. That person who's doing something for a reason, it's almost always your main character. It might be you going about the process of investigating a story and getting answers that change our understanding of an issue. It might be the doctor developing a better way of screening essential workers for Covid 19 so that fewer workers get sick. Or maybe it's a teenager protesting against the environmental racism in her community. All of these are examples of people doing something

for a reason. And there are people whose voices are all important to the story you're planning to tell. You may have other voices you need to hear from as well, but it's important to spend time figuring out who a listener needs to literally hear from in your story. Because one of the things audio storytelling does so well is show emotion. In print we have to describe emotion, but in audio you can hear emotion in somebody's voice. Once you've done an interview with the person doing something for a reason or any of the people that need to figure in your story, you really should be listening for those emotional moments when you go through their tape. If there's tape that makes you laugh or cry or have any sort of emotional reaction, that's tape to think about using. We can always write a narration to explain a fact or describe an action. But the emotional reaction is something you need to hear in the person's own voice. You can hear how two people feel about each other when they interact during an interview. You can hear somebody's frustration with the question you just asked. And that tells us something. And you can even hear excitement about what somebody just discovered when they're telling the story of their discovery to you.

[00:05:18] These moments provide a richness of information that can really only be transmitted through the human voice. That richness is one of the things that makes audio storytelling so powerful. As we discussed in the first part of the course.

[00:05:31] Next, we'll dive into some of the elements of writing that are different when you write for the ear, not the eye.