

Module 4: New technology is creating new ways of listening

[00:00:04] Last but definitely not least in this class. Let's take a look at how big tech has been embracing the old form of audio storytelling.

[00:00:12] There was this time in the immediate years before podcasting became a thing where I was starting to get worried about my own career prospects. I was a radio producer and I made things using sound. But this was at a time when the Web was king. Everything was becoming about blogs and text and then video, all things you look at. No one was talking about audio. In radio we were all being told spelling now counted and we needed to learn how to write web stories, take pictures and shoot video. Audio was kind of going the way of the dinosaur thanks to technology.

[00:00:46] But that was right before technology shifted again. Let's return to our chart. See, I was having my career crisis right before the smartphone revolution. That shift in computing technology did a lot to reignite audio because it made podcasts a thing and opened the door to some other new ways of listening to content that we'll talk about later.

[00:01:06] And the revolution after smartphones in 2017, that's the one we're still at the beginning of, is the voice platform revolution. Alexa and Siri and Google are now at our beckon call waiting for us to talk to them. And then they respond back to us using words.

[00:01:21] So both of those two revolutions in computer technology ushered in an absolute audio renaissance. Suddenly, audio producers like me and audio editors were in demand. Newspapers, the tech giants, magazines and the like are now all in need of audio producers and audio storytellers to create podcasts and even make smart speaker skills. But there are three developments in audio that the tech companies ushered in that don't get as much buzz as podcasts. These three areas are poised to be the places where we'll see growth, experimentation and innovation in the future. They're continuous, personalized listening, interactive storytelling and augmented reality.

[00:02:01] Let's tackle continuous, personalized listening. This is something I've actually been working on for the last four years with NPR One. So a little background, radio, that thing you listen to on a radio in your car or maybe on an old clock radio that's broadcast over the air from radio towers is something we call linear radio these days, because radio has also found its way to streams on websites and in smart speakers. It's linear in that it only goes one direction: forward. You don't get to choose where you start. You don't get to skip. You can't back up. You turn on the radio and you come in mid show, mid story, midsentence, mid word, and you kind of just have to deal with that. But on the upside, everything is done for you. It's programmed. It's curated. The news or music is selected for you. And yeah, it's the same for everyone because it's a broadcast one thing to many people.

[00:02:55] There's also a thing on the other side of the spectrum from linear radio called on demand audio. On demand because it's there when you want it, kind of like a podcast or a news story on a radio stations website. It's something you can select to listen to when you want to listen to it. And you can get exactly what you want when you want it. And you get to start from the beginning. But the downside is you have to make all the choices and you have to figure out what it is that you want to listen to. With news like music, all those choices can get overwhelming. So continuous listening is somewhere in the middle of that spectrum between on demand audio and linear radio.

[00:03:32] We started NPR One after seeing how Music Listening was gravitating toward services like Pandora. Pandora and Spotify can offer this endless mix of music that's customized according to your tastes. With Pandora you seeded the mix with something you chose, but then they had this algorithm that would learn what you liked based on whether you gave songs a thumbs up or you skipped the song. We wanted to take a cue from that and apply it to news, but that presented some challenges. We didn't want people to filter bubble themselves into only hearing one point of view or getting such a skewed version of what was going on by virtue of what they chose, that it ceased to be the news anymore.

[00:04:10] We also learned that people don't like news stories the way they do music. See people just don't give a thumbs up to stories about war or corruption like they do to that summer anthem from their youth. But still, we were able to create an editorially responsible algorithm that would assemble a mix of national, international and local news that gave people the most relevant and up to date news, as well as a helping of stories that listener was particularly interested in. This approach allowed us to greatly increase the amount of time listeners would listen for.

[00:04:40] Now NPR wasn't alone in this work. A number of broadcasting companies in Europe have similar services. Even Spotify is now mixing news and podcasts into its daily drive service. And Google News for Assistant takes a similar approach to NPR One, but mixes audio news from a large number of publishers.

[00:04:59] Alexa is also playing around with a similar concept. When Alexa launched, it started offering people flash briefings. That's where you could set up a briefing for yourself or even a sequence of briefings. Briefings were kind of like podcasts or mini radio shows, but Alexa found that a lot of people didn't really set these up and if they did bother to do so, they weren't listening for long. So Amazon moved away from flash briefings and started offering something they call long form news. That's where when you ask Alexa for the news, you're then asked what provider you'd like to get the news from. Once you select a provider, you then get a continuous mix of stories from that provider. NPR hooked it up to NPR One. So ours is personalized. Some of the other publishers are just providing a static RSS of stories. But I wouldn't be surprised if their advancements to personalize other publishers content that I'm not aware of. But it's another example of continuous flows of content. The advantage of this approach that many of us are taking is that it really offers the best of both worlds. It offers all the advantages of linear radio and many of the advantages of on demand. You don't have to do the work of figuring out what exactly you want to listen to, but you can control your listening by skipping, leaning on the personalization and so on.

[00:06:15] So to sum up, continuous listening is something that is suited listening on both smartphones and voice assistance. It makes mixes of audio, news, podcasts and even music available in ways that feel native and appropriate to the devices we're using these days when we want to listen to audio content. In the next lecture, we'll talk about interactivity and augmented reality.