



## *The Transom Review*

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### **Storytelling on the Radio Builds Community, On-Air and Off**

by Jay Allison

***“The journalist must be facilitator, fact-checker, ethicist, but not a puppet-master.”***

(This article was originally written for Nieman Reports  
The Fall 2001 issue, “The Documentary and Journalism”)

What separates radio documentary from any documentary?  
And what separates public radio journalism from any  
journalism?

Radio gets inside us. Lacking earbuds, we are defenseless, vulnerable to ambush. Sounds and voices surprise us from within. As radio documentary makers, we have this tactical advantage over our colleagues in print, film, television, photography. Our tool is aural story, the most primitive and powerful. Invisibility is our friend. Prejudice is suspended while the listener is blind, only listening.

Perhaps this distinguishing trait lies quietly near the heart of public radio journalism, close to the utopian ideal that we will use our public airwaves to share our stories as we try to understand each other better, to not be afraid of each other, to come a little closer together.

We're not regular media, after all, or even regular journalism. We have a calling to mission and public service that exists outside the marketplace and squarely in the civic realm. We can serve that mission through traditional reporting and documentary, but we also have the chance to help citizens speak for



themselves, to one another, directly.

I got into public radio because someone at NPR loaned me a tape recorder and microphone. It was the mid-70s and NPR was just inventing itself, always a good time to join an enterprise. I used the recorder as a passport into every part of life that seemed interesting. I could find out about anything I wanted. Amazing. At the beginning, I was simply a citizen, suddenly armed with the tools of production and a means of distribution, an independent journalist being born. By apprenticing at the news shows, reading everything I could get my hands on, and prodding my elders with questions, I learned the trade on the fly and in the next 25 years made hundreds of radio features, documentaries and series. For much of that time, I've also been loaning out tape recorders and tools to others, encouraging citizen voices on the air, re-paying and re-playing my own start.

In an age of corporate consolidation of the press on one hand, and cheap bogus Internet journalism on the other, it is more important than ever to bring a range of voices to the air in a sane and respectful way. The public radio journalist can assume a shepherding role.

## Life Stories

[www.atlantic.org](http://www.atlantic.org)

My first batch of tape recorders went out beginning in the 1980s with the series “Life Stories” which sought out stories that seemed best told from the source. (A six-hour collection aired on NPR stations this summer) It's hard to say how I found the storytellers, but once I declared I was interested, they seemed to cross my path. I equipped them, instructed them in the use of the gear, and worked with them editorially in preparing the final pieces, often bringing them to mix in my home recording studio.

The grown son of concentration camp survivors accompanies his parents on their visit to the Holocaust Museum; he hopes they'll talk to him about their experience for the first time in his life. He asks for a recorder. A young woman wants to revisit the scenes and characters of her hospitalization and near-death from anorexia ten years before. She needs the passport of the recorder to enter her own past. These sorts of stories cannot be told best from outside. They are better lived and narrated by the principals, the main characters in the stories of their lives.

Radio is well suited to the "diary" form. It's inherently intimate, confidential, lends itself to scribbled notes, fragments, and whispered entries at night. The technical inexperience of the diarist doesn't show as clearly as it does in video, or even in print, and therefore doesn't get in the way. As the eventual producer/editor, you are there, but you disappear. The journalist must be facilitator, fact-checker, ethicist, but not a puppet-master, allowing the listener to maintain an authentic, direct, empathetic encounter with the teller.

## Lost & Found Sound

[www.lostandfoundsound.com](http://www.lostandfoundsound.com)

Our series, “Lost & Found Sound” (produced with the Kitchen Sisters, Nikki Silva and Davia Nelson for NPR's *All Things Considered*) offered another tool to the citizen storyteller -- voice mail. We asked

listeners to call and tell us about precious audio artifacts they'd saved. In my role as "Curator," I poured through hundreds of these messages and in virtually every case, the phone message itself became the spine of the piece. In the message was the story, the link between the caller and the sound.

The callers, in telling of their treasures, seemed to be in the presence of the past. The voices they described were in the air around them, true ghosts, filled with breath, as real as a lock of hair. Some of the recordings were intensely personal --the lullaby of an immigrant grandparent, the answering machine message from a child given up for adoption. Others fell at the intersection between the individual and history--a family's recording of an ancestor's eyewitness account of the Gettysburg Address, reels of tape made in the fighting holes of Vietnam, brought to us by the platoon mate of the 19-year-old Marine who recorded them and died there.

In every case, the direct connection of the living citizen to the sounds of the past was the key. We called it "The Universal Ancestor Effect." A grandfather's voice, enhanced by the love of the grandchild who tells us about it, and then shared on the radio, is somehow transformed to become everyone's grandfather. In the absence of a concrete and distancing visual image, an invisible human link is made and, for that instant, nationalities and races are joined through voice and memory. All the dead are one. Your mother is mine. Only radio, and only public radio at that, has the uncanny means and the actual calling to make that happen.

## WCAI & WNAN

[www.cainan.org](http://www.cainan.org)

We have brand new public radio stations here on Cape Cod, Martha's Vineyard, and Nantucket in Massachusetts, the newest in America. We wanted them to sound like here, not just anywhere. A place defines itself by its stories and we have chosen to broadcast our citizens' stories on and off all day, unexpectedly--portraits, oral histories, poems, anecdotes, memories, fragments of life overheard. They pop up during every national show around the clock, short bursts of life as experienced or remembered by all of us who live here. They are the thread in the fabric of our broadcast day.

The effect is startling, unexpected. You are listening to news of the world and then, during a pause, an unheralded speaker--a local elder or high school kid or sandwich maker or scientist--pops in. The voices of our neighbors, taking us by surprise, are given equal weight with events on the world stage.

The concept has become wonderfully popular here. Learning from "Lost & Found Sound," we've also installed voice mail where people can tell us about something that happened years ago, or that morning. Learning from "Life Stories," we buy old cassette recorders from EBAY to loan to whomever promises to use them.

Listeners have said that these little breaks not only contribute to community, they actually *build* it. We live in a place that is geographically fragmented (islands, after all) and each region feels itself to be more "special" than the others. Yet the radio signal extends across them all, disrespecting the boundaries. We have feuds and jealousies here, political division, parochial ignorance (Is it so different from anywhere else?), but these stories tend, almost miraculously, to break those down. When a story

begins, we don't know where the teller is from, so we simply listen, without judgement. We like what we hear. But then, when we discover the teller is not from our island, we must decide how to incorporate the contradiction which may lead us, helplessly, to acceptance. "Well, I guess they're not *all* bad over there," we think. And eventually, we may even come to think of *their* stories as *our* stories.

## Transom.org

[www.transom.org](http://www.transom.org)

Finally, the Internet. If there's democracy in storytelling, it's here. If there's an openly accessible way to pass on what we've done before in public radio and to try to make things better, it's here. Our current attempt is Transom.org (a project of Atlantic Public Media). We call it a showcase and workshop for new public radio and we premiered the Web site in February. It's a combination library, master class and audition stage.

The site showcases new work from first-time producers and unheard work from established producers. At the moment I'm writing this, the featured piece is a forty-year-old, and utterly contemporary, documentary from Studs Terkel, which never received a national broadcast. Last month, we featured a documentary from a first-time producer in Seattle who used his mini-disc recorder, and skills he picked up at Transom, to craft a remarkable story about his friend's suicide.

Transom holds or links to virtually all the tools--technical, editorial, philosophical--people would need to tell their own radio stories. Encouragingly, quite a few high school and college students are frequenting the site and their work has been featured there.

Each month a new special guest writes a "manifesto" and hangs around the site, critiquing new work and making conversation. Recent guests: Tony Kahn, Scott Carrier, Paul Tough, The Kitchen Sisters, Sarah Vowell, Studs Terkel [Please see accompanying excerpts from the Web site.] Editors, producers, and managers throughout the public radio system read and listen to this work, and participate in these conversations, but they are also there for *anyone* to read, listen to and join.

Producers and citizens gather at Transom.org to talk about radio documentary and to try their hands at it. Subjects of documentaries talk with those who made them and to listeners about editorial and stylistic choices. The site encourages an interactive, self-correcting, open-eared, civic journalism, made possible by the Internet and extended to public radio.

The site represents virtual street-level access to national air, as most Transom stories end up adopted by a national program vehicle. An on-air mention of Transom.org drives listeners back to the Web, making a creative circle between the traditional media and the new. At Transom.org, we have a voice mail line to collect stories, we loan out tape recorders, and we broadcast Transom pieces locally on *WCAI* and *WNAN*.

So, everything ends up tied together.

Journalists help citizens reach the air, to tell of their own lives. Public radio carries the voices out and back, across a borderless country populated by the living and the dead. Citizen stories are shared out

loud, journalists mediating the exchange, partners in the mission. Somewhere between the din of the Internet and the drone of corporate media is a place for these voices, testifying on their own behalf.

## About Jay Allison

Jay Allison is an independent broadcast journalist living in Woods Hole Massachusetts. He is Founder and Executive Producer of WCAI & WNAN and Atlantic Public Media. His radio documentaries air often on NPR and his solo-crew video documentaries on ABC News “Nightline.”

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## Listening to Radio Talk

*At Transom.org, the conversation is about documentaries and radio*

*Transom.org (an online project of Atlantic Public Media in Woods Hole, Massachusetts) provides tools for public radio production and features original work from first-time producers. It also hosts forums for the general discussion of public radio journalism and storytelling. What follows are a few excerpts from the Transom discussion boards. Some exchanges are sequential. Most are not. The following comments were selected from recent conversations on the general themes of radio documentary and the role of public radio. Transom is frequented by seasoned journalists, beginners, and listeners. The happy equalizing effect of online conversation is that it matters less who you are than what you have to say.*

**~ Jay Allison**

## Quotes

"It was slowly discovered that there can be no such thing as an objective documentary. However, it's such an attractive illusion that "documentarians" are always finding new ways to fake it. That's our job."

*~ Larry Massett (Independent radio producer)*

"I'd say that what's left out is at least as important as what's put in. This is where the tension comes from. And if the overall tension of a story is just right then it stands on its own, like a tensegrity structure--tension and compression, strings and rods. If there is too much or too little of one or the other, the thing falls apart."

*~ Scott Carrier (Writer, Independent radio producer)*

"Reality is just a bunch of raw data."

*~ Carol Wasserman ("All Things Considered" commentator)*

"For newcomers struggling to edit their tape down to manageable size, the best technique would be the old one of recording everything on reel to reel analog tape. This has one great advantage (assuming, of course, you were not silly enough to make a back-up dub): at some point in the editing you will lose the tape... It will vanish; or you'll step on by mistake and crush it. Then, fate having made these decisions for you, you just work with what's left."

*~ Larry Massett*

"We work in documentary because we don't have enough money to hire good actors."

~ *Scott Carrier*

"It's one thing to write a piece of fiction and say, at the end, well, okay, that sure didn't turn out exactly as I imagined it would, and quite another to sit down to write about, say, grandma and have grandma come out looking like nothing so much as a wet cardboard box filled with old issues of Reader's Digest, a sewing machine, and a pot of boiling cabbage."

~ *Paul Maliszewski (Writer)*

"Sometimes I feel like I'm so much more manipulative on the radio. I know how to use my voice to make you feel a certain way. And that's not writing--that's acting. I get tired of acting sometimes. Which is why it's nice to be able to go back to the cold old page. Also, real time is an unforgiving medium."

~ *Sarah Vowell (Writer, Editor "This American Life")*

"Think of comedic timing, where a pause after the punch line allows the audience to process the joke. Then think of some nervous humor-impaired friend who can't tolerate that tiny silence, and jumps his own joke with premature explanation."

~ *Carol Wasserman*

"Reading most long sentences is like trying to nail Jell-O to a wall."

~ *David Clark (Writer)*

"Nailing Jell-O to the wall isn't as hard as you'd think. Getting your mother to appreciate it is much harder."

~ *Andy Knight (Listener, critic)*

"Radio is like food. You spend days and months and hours gathering the ingredients, cutting, mixing, making it cook. The minute it hits air/the table, it's gone - but its transformed. The memory of it lingers, almost like a dream."

~ *The Kitchen Sisters (Nikki Silva and Davia Nelson, Independent radio producers)*

"Throw out all the good tape. Keep only the great tape. Invent some artifice to string the disparate pieces of great tape together into something that sounds like a story. Invent many excuses to tell NPR why this works so well and not even a second can be changed. When NPR tells you to cut it to half the length, throw away all the great tape and keep only the absolutely stellar tape, then repeat above steps."

~ *Barrett Golding (Independent radio producer)*

"We are committed to never altering the spirit or intent of what someone says, but we do cut the hell out of them."

~ *The Kitchen Sisters*

"I strongly believe that everyone has a story to tell. I also believe some are unwilling and others are unable to tell their story."

~ *Andy Knight*

"Look for the people in the funny hats. With some people, it's apparent that they have stories they want to tell. With others, you have to find out where they keep their hats."

~ *Jay Allison*

"People tend to spill their guts on long drives."

~ *Scott Carrier*

"It's hard to find unprocessed voices that are coherent and honest and clear."

~ *Paul Tough (Story editor, The New York Times magazine)*

"Listening to the radio every day for an entire year was a prison sentence. It was the most depressing, annoying, debilitating project I have ever undertaken, and I have a master's degree in art history."

~ *Sarah Vowell*

"Public radio has always felt like the lecture hall of the world's greatest free university. You still need to get yourself dressed and down to the library to do the reading, but you can show up for the talks in your jammies. Which is a great convenience."

~ *Carol Wasserman*

"I still maintain excellence shows up more often in public radio because no one owns public radio, except the public."

~ *Ian Brown (Radio host, "This Morning")*

"The BBC is like a beacon, it can turn a cool beam of light on a story anywhere in the world and people see what's going on. American public radio is more like a campfire, where we like to swap personal stories and feel like we're sharing the experience and the understanding."

~ *Tony Kahn (Radio host, "The World")*

"You hear stuff you haven't heard before, from a stranger or from someone you know, and you think, "Yeah, I am connected." I think that's the goal, the responsibility, the challenge of public radio."

~ *Studs Terkel (Writer, Oral historian, Radio host)*

"What would your ideal radio day be?"

~ *Sydney Lewis (Oral historian)*

"I'd want the human voice expressing grievances, or delight, or whatever it might be. But something real"

~ *Studs Terkel*

"I still believe in public radio's potential. Because it's the one mass medium that's still crafted almost entirely by true believers."

~ *Sarah Vowell*

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# About Transom



## What We're Trying To Do

Here's the short form: Transom.org is an experiment in channeling new work and voices to public radio through the Internet, and for discussing that work, and encouraging more. We've designed Transom.org as a performance space, an open editorial session, an audition stage, a library, and a hangout. Our purpose is to create a worthy Internet site and make public radio better.

Submissions can be stories, essays, home recordings, sound portraits, interviews, found sound, non-fiction pieces, audio art, whatever, as long as it's good listening. Material may be submitted by anyone, anywhere -- by citizens with stories to tell, by radio producers trying new styles, by writers and artists wanting to experiment with radio.

We contract with Special Guests to come write about work here. We like this idea, because it 1) keeps the perspective changing so we're not stuck in one way of hearing, 2) lets us in on the thoughts of creative minds, and 3) fosters a critical and editorial dialog about radio work, a rare thing.

Our Discussion Boards give us a place to talk it all over. Occasionally, we award a Transom.org t-shirt to especially helpful users, and/or invite them to become Special Guests.

## Staff

**Producer/Editor** - *Jay Allison*

**Web Director/Designer** - *Joshua T. Barlow*

**Editors** - *Viki Merrick, Carol Wasserman, Paul Tough, Jeff Towne, Helen Woodward*

**Web Developers** - *Josef Verbanac, Barrett Golding*

## Advisors

*Scott Carrier, Nikki Silva, Davia Nelson, Ira Glass, Doug Mitchell, Larry Massett, Sara Vowell, Skip Pizzi, Susan Stamberg, Flawn Williams, Paul Tough, Bruce Drake, Bill McKibben, Bob Lyons, Tony Kahn, Ellin O'Leary, Marita Rivero, Alex Chadwick, Claire Holman, Larry Josephson, Dmae Roberts, Dave Isay, Stacy Abramson, Gregg McVicar, Ellen Weiss, Ellen McDonnell, Robin White, Joe Richman, Steve Rowland, Johanna Zorn, Elizabeth Meister*



# ATLANTIC PUBLIC MEDIA

Atlantic Public Media administers Transom.org. APM is a non-profit organization based in Woods Hole, Massachusetts which has as its mission "to serve public broadcasting through training and mentorship, and through support for creative and experimental approaches to program production and distribution." APM is also the founding group for *WCAI & WNAN*, a new public radio service for Cape Cod, Martha's Vineyard, and Nantucket under the management of *WGBH*-Boston.

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