



## *The Transom Review*

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### Christopher Lydon's Topic



#### **About Christopher Lydon**

Christopher Lydon has been an unconventional voice in print and broadcast journalism for more than 30 years—covering presidential politics in the Washington bureau of the *New York Times*; anchoring the “Ten O’Clock News” on WGBH, public television in Boston; and as the founder and host of “The Connection” at WBUR since 1994. He “blends the expansiveness of the Renaissance thinker with a trademark Boston toughness,” the *Boston Globe* observes. Born in Boston in 1940, he graduated from the Roxbury Latin School and Yale. Lydon ran for mayor of Boston in 1993 in a citizens’ campaign for radical school reform.

#### *Christopher Lydon Links*

##### **Christopher Lydon's Website**

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

##### **"The Connection" Archives**

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

### **A Word From Jay Allison**

**September 21, 2001**

It may seem an odd time to focus on craft, but craft is often what gets you through. The ability to do the job well is always important, and especially in a crisis. Further, our chosen work -- radio -- is essential in any modern crisis. Much depends on our skill, more than we sometimes know. Certainly radio is important as a lifeline, a communication link, but also... for conversation, for connection.

If you live within earshot of Boston -- or anywhere else “The Connection” aired under Christopher Lydon's hostship -- you know he is one of the finest practitioners of the radio talk show craft, ever.

There were days listening to that program where the primary response was a feeling of gratitude. From the first drum beat through the energetic prose of Chris's introduction, sweeping on through conversational hours you never imagined in advance. If there was ever a public radio program that made you feel like standing up and giving money, Chris's Connection was it.

When I read his Transom Manifesto in email just now, it made me realize how much I miss him on the air. Many of us urge the alignment of righteous forces to put him back there as soon as possible. In the meantime, we welcome him here.

If you want to consider the history of Chris's departure from WBUR, etc., other sites have covered that, like bulletin boards at WBUR or at Chris's own site. (By the way, the latter includes a archived series of webcasts and a commercial radio stint in Boston. And, WBUR keeps past programs at The Connection Archive; search prior to February 15, 2001) Here, we'd like to focus on what Chris can tell us about the nature of this line of work, the power and usefulness of the medium of radio and the genre of the talk show.

Radio can be used to spew venom and propaganda or encourage violence and breed mindless mobs, even nationalistic ones, which will not be a trivial fact in the coming weeks and months. Public radio call-in shows have a responsibility to counter that -- both nationally and locally -- to act as steam vents and barometers, classrooms and town meetings. Here's what I imagine: Visitors to Transom.org from radio stations everywhere come seek better skills to steer through their jobs in these days, and Chris Lydon, along with Mary McGrath and others of his staff, will help.

America's action will be a function of its political will. Radio, and the radio talk show, have an undeniable link to that will. We are among the moderators of the dialogue. We can frame the debate. We can write the captions to the pictures.

It is a mistake to think that public radio is some backwater in these times. At our local stations, we know that our audience has increased enormously. There is a yearning for sensible, trustworthy, inspiring words. That's us -- armed with the purpose of public service, an ear for stories and hymns and poems, and the careful practice of craft.

# Christopher Lydon's Manifesto

**Christopher Lydon**  
**September 21, 2001**

Aren't we all struck in post-Apocalyptic America by the gaps between official speak ("We're at war...") and the media discourse ("America Attacked.. New York responds..") and the infinitely various sound of people's conversations?

Speak for your own family kitchen table, your own phone calls, your own beauty shop, your classroom, your street corner, your church parking lot, your answers to your own kids' questions. It seems commonplace to observe that in my own pretty commonplace experience, including one funeral for a software engineer (and French horn player) on Flight 11, it's the ordinary off-line encounters that pulse with the fathomless depths of this experience. The plain talk is unembarrassed by pain, sorrow, infinite sadness. It assumes a fundamental connectedness here in a diabolical crime story that is also a political crisis at the edge of a financial/industrial crisis enfolded in a spiritual crisis, inseparable from the crisis of the crass jiggle-show culture that our satellites rain down on the world. Yet the common talk I've heard is not resigned, much less despairing. It doesn't sound vengeful either. The dread, such as it is, for the end of the American Century arises not from their attack but from the question of our collective response. And nobody's giving up.

I'm a talk-show host feeling distraught to be off the air in this moment. I'm reading *The New York Times* for hours every day, listening to the media discourse, and straining to hear also the American conversation.

Of course I'd bet on that conversation, not the media discourse, to save us. It's what we'd want to listen to, in any event.

I'd bet on Talk Radio (if it were also Listen Radio) to close the gap here. Yet let's face it: most of what's called talk radio is rant radio. It's essentially a comedy format that is now and ever the most blatant caricature of American prurience, bullying, knuckle-dragging anti-intellectualism and name-calling.

The commercial "talk" is mostly locker-room gab of unfunny old men too feeble to snap a real towel. The public-radio alternative has been vastly better. Sober and safe, it's had brilliant moments--like John Burnett's report on NPR yesterday morning on the multi-national staff of the late Windows on the World restaurant. And still public radio has seemed to me far short of what we are going to need to recover citizen voices in a bomb-shattered public square. Most days and nights, and notably when political figures are onstage, public radio has been sounding like CNN without pictures: just the facts, ma'am, and more facts, and the same hand-me-around security veterans and terrorism experts (whatever the titles are worth) with much the same propaganda barrage from the war room.

The cancellation of product commercials and underwriting credits in the first day or two after the Trade Center went down was a relief. Then you began to realize that it was all one commercial: "Brought to

you by: World War Three!" The phrase has always meant nuclear Armageddon. The subliminal extra in the new context is: it's all-out war with the Third World.

For this Transom forum I would plead with all comers to pursue the question: what might radio do to give coherence and weight to an open, popular reflection on ourselves and our country in what is no longer an abstraction--an Age of Terrorism that could go on for the rest of our lives.

The prejudice coming out of my own experience is that talk radio is a well-nigh perfect medium for an inquiry that's got to be broad and deep, substantive and as unpredictably emotional as Dan Rather's tears, inexpensive and reasonably independent, accessibly democratic, non-commercial, open to digression and dissent, open to thousands of voices, credentialed and not.

The Web can be a lot of those things and more, but it's damnably diffuse at a time like this, and lacking in continuity. Worse, it's completely without the many-layered magic, the grit, variety, dynamic range, accent and authenticity of Studs Terkel's beloved "vox humana." A large part of what we need right now is to hear more of that fabulous instrument.

Paraphrasing Studs in his Transom interview with Sydney Lewis in June, we need to hear women in the laundromat, and the little old tramp, and something like the conversation Studs grew up hearing in the lobby of his parents' Wells Grand Hotel. We need to hear the working-class boy who wants to be an intellectual and says, "Stately minds. We need stately minds." And we know they are out there.

I wasn't always a radio nut, incidentally. I fell into radio from political reporting from *The New York Times'* Washington bureau in the Seventies, and public-television with the Ten O'Clock News in with WGBH, Boston through the Eighties. Radio for a lot of us who back into it is supposed to be "the twilight of a mediocre career," as Mark Shields says. But radio for me felt more like the start of my adult education, as well as the best work I'd ever done, with an incomparably smart, aggressive colleague Mary McGrath, in a medium that could be all intensity, no clutter. I was out from under the institutional voice of *The New York Times*, and free of the visuals on TV news that are mostly distraction even now. (Television anchors discover at some point: your audience is not really listening to what you're saying. No, on a normal night, viewers are looking at your hair! They're trying to decide if it's a wig, or whether you need a trim or a dye job. It's not a pretty thought, but consider for a moment how much you know about Barbara Walters' hair.(Peter Jennings', too.)

On the radio, of course I was only relearning what I'd known all along. Tony Schwartz, the advertising genius who has been recording the street sounds of his Hell's Kitchen neighborhood in Manhattan for 50 years, used to show me 60-second TV spots he made for political candidates in the 1970s. In a Schwartz ad, the video might show only the face of an industrial clock with its second-hand sweeping the full circle: nothing to watch, in short, while the voice-over extolled Bob Abrams, as I recall, for Attorney General. The trick, Tony Schwartz explained, was to neutralize the eye to get to the ear--that is, to land the audio message under the video radar, precisely because the ear, not the eye, was the route to both heart and mind.

And in practice, it turned out, radio worked exactly that way.

For most of seven years from WBUR, Boston, we did a different sort of public-radio talk program, "The Connection," which we also called "Rush Limbaugh for Grown-Ups." We touched all the familiar bases of politics, books, work, and music. But we defined ourselves by our unfamiliar subjects and approaches. We used to say: we're the program where Robert Pinsky, later the Poet Laureate, read his new translation of Dante for an hour, and where the pianist Robert Levin was buried in calls on Unfinished Mozart, which he'd thought only he cared about. We asked listeners to write short stories and verse, and to describe their experience of the sublime. With the help of NPR, the BBC and the New York Times, we covered the Kosovo war relentlessly.

Radio meets the Henry David Thoreau test: it's a job that doesn't require a new set of clothes. Equally for callers: radio doesn't require you to look your best or feel tip-top either, but just to think and speak with a certain authenticity. Focus helps. Humor, excitement, some learning all help. The breathtaking news to me, I confess, was the many multitudes of individuals who handled it all brilliantly. Like the man who called into our write-the-coming-headlines game on a New Year's Eve, and referred to the mumbling malaprop Mayor of Boston. He said: "Chris, here's your headline: Surgeons Liberate Small Gerbil from Tom Menino's Tongue." Star callers came often to outshine star guests. Our favorite was "Amber in Boston," a Barbadian immigrant with a high-school education who stalked the big game on our show, and out-talked the best of them: Camille Paglia, Harold Bloom and Gore Vidal. It was Amber who put her finger on what was different about our program. Her line was:

*"the great unwashed hear a lot of the same stiffs on your program that we hear on all the other programs. The premise of the other shows, she said, was that we're so lucky to hear their guests; the premise of your shows is that those talking heads are so lucky to meet us!"*

We want precisely what Ralph Waldo Emerson was looking for when he founded his magazine, *The Dial*, in 1840. It should be non-conformist, "a little bad," Emerson said, anticipating Black English. He told his editor, Margaret Fuller, that "we might court some of the good fanatics," but all in all he said *The Dial* should speak as "one cheerful rational voice amidst the din of mourners and polemics." Emerson's "mourners and polemics" are more than ever dominant among the bullies, sycophants and profiteers in the American media of the 21st Century. But Emerson would challenge us to make the vital space our own.

I nominate radio as the device that can diversify and extend and sustain and weave the current of our best private questions and insights into a public conversation. It might actually redeem what feels like a long engagement of our superpower democracy with reaction and fear.

Could we talk under the Transom here for the next month or so about exactly how to make it work?

# A Conversation With Christopher Lydon

## **Dope Slap**

**Jackson Braider - September 21, 2001**

I confess there were moments when I wanted to give you dope-slaps. For instance, there you'd be, with a poet, then you'd start reading the poet's own lines to him/her. And yet, I must also confess that I listened often, and even called in, more than once. I wanted to strangle you -- metaphorically, of course -- for your fathomless pursuit of Monicagate, for example.

But you present a different take on talk radio -- at least you seem to. Any particular theory underlying your approach? Is the caller always right? Do you feel the host serves as instigator, cajoler, collaborateur?

## **Did NPR go to war?**

**Stef - September 22, 2001**

Has NPR put itself on a wartime footing? Who gets the time to opine into NPR microphones and what kind of perceptions do they tend to have?

I am wondering if the reality is that the kind of people who are available to NPR as commentators at the ready, are basically people at the major American university-based think tanks and institutes, and if succeeding at one of these institutes somehow filtered out people who might bring a more subtle perspective to bear on our incipient war.

## **Crafting A Response Through Sound**

**Michael Joly - September 22, 2001**

Jay Allison's call to focus on craft struck a chord with me.

After I turned off the TV early in the afternoon on Sept. 11, I went outside "to do something". It seems the urge to do something was, and is, a response shared by many.

What I do is make flutes from reeds, "Japanese knot weed" and record with them. Because these reeds are so easy to work with, a flute can be fashioned in a very short period of time - less than an hour - to provide me with a powerfully effective emotional processing device.

When words fail me, crafting and playing a reed flute focuses all my senses on wordlessly "making sense" and moves me through stages of emotion from shock, to disbelief, to anger, to fear, to vengeance, to acceptance and finally to Hope.



Holding the reed in my hands and scraping off the outer bark with a pen knife dispels disbelief because I see that I too am holding a knife and attacking a body, the body of the reed. My intent constructive, not destructive, but a knife in my hand nevertheless forces acknowledgment and believe. These terrible acts of violence against human bodies DID occur.

Belief becomes anger as I ram a threaded steel rod down the inside of the reed to remove the nodes separating one section from the next. Steel rods, essential building reinforcement materials, are now lying in heaps on the ground in lower Manhattan and that makes me fear for the future safety of those I love.

A blow hole is cut into the hollow reed. For the first time my gathered emotions are expelled with breath to produce sound. I taste the raw woodyness of the reed and my sighs of sorrow turn vengeful when I blow the flute's lowest note, a soft A below middle C then forcefully overblow into the octave above and then the octave above that. Three notes, all A, rising, a fist of vengeful sound blowing down the walls of terrorism.

Catching my breath, inhaling life again, brings acceptance and the energy to continue. To continue making the rest of flute, to live, to do what I do - to put holes in reeds to modulate breath sound around wordless ruminations.

The finger holes are located and cut quickly to capture the energy and emotions of the moment. Only now do I have access to Hope through modal improvisation.

This September 11 flute, made so soon after the event, is for me doorway to a room of emotional rumination that I'll revisit again and again as I continue to craft a response through sound.

## **Sound**

### **Jay Allison - September 22, 2001**

I'd like to hear that.

## **Craft and the Connection**

### **Adam Gertsacov - September 22, 2001**

Chris, I really enjoyed your hosting of the connection for one main reason-- the connections.

For me, the zig zag off kilter way you managed to range around topics, to lead the guests in such a way that they seemed to be picking their own topic, was both infuriating and fascinating.

My question is: Do you have any tips for keeping the conversation on the wire?

## **Introducing Mary McGrath Chris Lydon - September 24, 2001**

I want to introduce Mary McGrath into this terrific thread immediately because I can never imagine constructing these conversations without her impatient curiosity and her tough insistence on "trading up" at every opportunity. That is: get a better guest, ask a deeper question, try another caller. As a producer/director Mary is invariably driving

- (a) to make a show different from any other (different from Imus, Terry Gross or "Talk of the Nation," for example);
- (b) to make a radio hour an "event" in itself, in the style of John Hockenberry on TOTN--it can't feel like just a reading from a book;
- (c) to force it open to listeners as a real conversation with the right callers--she is always asking: "what's the question for callers here?";
- (d) to incite callers that incite others, so that the conversation does zig-zag and seems to build geometrically; it's never a straight line.
- (e) to build crescendos and diminuendos into the live hour that give some form to an organic mystery. The control-room observation was that 43 minutes into the hour was the magic moment for some sort of climax or revelation in the best shows. They do have a shape, but it takes a lot of "production" to find it.

In the first 48 hours of Transom comments so far, there seem to be two big headings: 1. WHAT we desperately want to talk about and 2. HOW we can use the radio uniquely to talk about them. As to the WHAT, I'd aim for the gaps between the conversations we're having at home and the "media discourse." The easiest example is the media stampede to pronounce President George W. Bush our Churchill. Don Imus, who's given him the nitwit treatment before, intoned last Friday that he sees now in our almost accidental chief the stuff of Lincoln and FDR. Seriously, folks, could we start a list of the points where "the line" has got to be decoded and confronted? Before we rush to war in and over the trackless wastes of Afghanistan, for example, I dream of a cautionary conversation on the air with the author of "Kim" and "The Man Who Would Be King," Rudyard Kipling. Correspondents: please name the Big Questions we need to talk about.

As to the HOW question, I'd like to hear people's beefs and biases about the best balance of guests and callers in talk shows that work. We like to say that our best shows are caller driven, but in fact we always avoided open-phone shows. We built our show around substantive guests, yet we'd swear that there's no such thing as an expert. So then, let's have another list, please, of Ideal Guests we're dying to hear in these darkly fascinating days.

## **Historical Context Needed**

**Amy Mack - September 24, 2001**

What isn't being adequately addressed in any of the media reports is the history and ideology of Islam as context, particularly with regard to Islam's relationship to, and conflict with, Christianity and Judaism. How do the tenets of Islam as a religion influence the thinking and actions of Muslims?

## **Ghee With Cumin**

**Michael Joly - September 24, 2001**

I'm an ambient sound supporter. Not just the itty bitty actualities we get daily on NPR but whole big gobs of living-in-it ambient sound.

On "Weekend Edition" the other day there was some sound from the Yankee Stadium memorial service. I got kinda pissed off that the Islamic chanting bit wasn't longer. I want to experience long, uninterrupted ambient sound that perfumes my room as much as goat cooked in ghee with cumin.

I sure would like to hear smart, passionate people talking over appropriate ambient sound spaces for the length of a show or topic.

## **Producer's Eye View**

**Mary McGrath - September 24, 2001**

I've been thinking a lot about the stories we'd be pursuing right now, the most interesting angles, and the guests. When I ask myself what it is we do better than others, I'd have to say it's subtle, but it's distinctive.

It starts with a host who's smart, curious, and engaged; who's among the great talkers himself. And then there's an amazing staff of energetic people a lot smarter than I am who love their jobs. During a big news story like this one we think very hard about each show and I watch the public radio rundown to make sure we're not duplicating anybody else's efforts. We're very competitive. We wouldn't be doing shows about how patriotic America is, or who's feeling guilty about moving on. There's no real controversy there. There's not an edgy question to pose to the audience. There's nothing really to learn. I want to learn more about the different factions of Islam. I want to know more about the intelligence void in America. I'd want to revisit America's role in creating Osama bin Laden. I'd want to hear from Russian generals who fought in Afghanistan and today I'd want to talk about Bob Woodward's story in yesterday's Washington Post which says no connection has been made between several al-Qaeda groups that have operated in the US for several years and any of the 19 hijackers responsible for the September 11 attacks.

We start with a compelling subject and some good guests. We pre-interview guests exhaustively and we have high standards. We don't worry needlessly about "balance," we don't hold Chris back from expressing his own opinions, and we let callers in on the fun of it. We screen them more than a little but



only to find the right ones that move the show forward. It's not just "vox pop." It's got to be constructive. And we don't linger with callers; the pace of the show is very important. Mostly at the end of an hour you'd want to hear more.

## **I Want to Hear More**

**Jay Allison - September 24, 2001**

I want to hear more

Good to have you here, Mary.

That's a great list of show topics. I'd like to hear them.

The screening thing interests me. What are your criteria? It doesn't strike me that you screen only to create controversy. Is intelligence a requirement? Can an ignorant or misinformed caller be a good choice to let through? Certainly commercial radio talk shows thrive on that type. Do your criteria change as the program goes on?

I wonder what contributions to this conversation you'd want to get on the air and why.

Must all good shows have controversy? I, as novice a call-in show host as there is in America, did a local hour on Friday about birds and the migrations in our area. It had been scheduled before the attack and we decided to go ahead, thinking it might have ameliorative effect precisely because it was unexpected, uncontroversial and focused our listeners for a moment on the larger ongoing world, let them look at the sky in a different way.

## **The Best Shows**

**Adam Gertsacov - September 24, 2001**

The best shows raise questions, not answers

At this juncture with all of the media ablaze with news about Osama Bin Laden, a breath of fresh air about other important issues would be well appreciated. How about a show talking about the tenuous line between tragedy and comedy?

## **Push Those Questions, Jay Allison Chris Lydon - September 25, 2001**

Great questions there, Jay.

Mary doesn't want to give away all the secrets of the special sauce, but you might press her on, for example, the picking of callers. I wasn't in on it, but she seemed to summon great voices from the vasty deep, just when you needed them. "Michael in Watertown" and "Joel in Brewster" and people like that.

Controversy is an important issue. Talk shows are supposed to thrive on it, but you notice that typically (Limbaugh, Laura Ingraham, Jay Severin et ilk) it's a one-way rant-a-thon that doesn't like to admit there's another side. I want to know what Mary says.

The bird-watching change-of-pace can sound like self-parody, but it's important; and with your Vernon Laux it's bound to be interesting. The late great Louis Lyons ("Well, here's the news..") of WGBH in Boston used to begin every broadcast with a note on the weather or the season (birds, crops, storm histories) just to set the context that enveloped all his listeners. Allusive digressions into nature and the arts have a particular value right now. The New York Times made it an important story on Saturday and later that Kurt Masur leapt into a performance of Brahms' German Requiem ("Blessed are those that mourn...") with the NY Philharmonic at Lincoln Center last Thursday night, at roughly the moment President Bush was addressing Congress. I am listening to that Requiem in my kitchen over and over these days, and feeling it as never before. Yes, you could do a talk program about it.

## **Intelligence is a Requirement for Callers Mary McGrath - September 25, 2001**

Jay, certainly, not all of our shows were controversial. Many were like adult education classes. We did a nine-week summer course on philosophy, a five part series on the senses, and an annual design-your-own-film festival show. We had haiku contests and a business plan contest. We did a magnetic poetry slam. We featured lots of non-controversial authors in Boston on book tours though we'd infuriate the publicists when we'd insist that they talk about a subject that interested us, rather than flog their new book. I used to say, "what's the subject for which so and so would make the perfect guest?" When Jonathan Letham was touring for one of his novels we put him on with a movie critic and did a program about John Ford's western, "The Searchers." We'll all remember Caroline who called in and said she'd seen the film 21 times.

I'll sound mean when I say that intelligence is a requirement for callers. Of course, we live among the great talk show callers in the world so we can be choosy. Often a show would be memorable more for the callers than the guests. We look for smart questions and comments, also for interesting personal experience and anecdotes. The idea is to continually move the program forward. If someone has been holding for 30 minutes wanting to react to something said very early in the hour, we'll apologize to the caller rather than go backwards.

## **A Bad Case of Missing Lydon Bill McKibben - September 25, 2001**

What a pleasure to hear Chris, if only in print. NPR has been doing a good job--especially the broadcasts from Krasny, and from WNYC--but the day-after-day reporting-via-talk-show that was the connection specialty in big news events is sorely missed. I'd be interested in hearing Chris talk about how to get a story to build day after day, instead of turning into rehashing. And what are the particular challenges when there are not two sides (as opposed to, say, last year's election crisis). Perhaps he can make reference to the way he kept up, month after month, on the story behind the economic disintegration of Russia. In any event, Chris we miss you now more than ever.

## **Steering The Discussion Daithi - September 26, 2001**

Christopher Lydon and Mary McGrath have kindly taken the initiative in talking about the art of radio. I use the word "art" on purpose, because I truly believe that it is of paramount importance that a line be drawn between going through the motions and actually producing a show that is a self-contained work of art. Rolling news, for example, is a service, but a good talk show, is a complete work and should be studied as such.

Just because it should be studied, however, doesn't mean that good radio deserves whimsical and pofaced essays to be written as a response. For example, one previous author referred to the sound portraits used by NPR at weekends. The collage that follows the news bulletin has always been an essential part of my Sunday afternoon (time lag). The art here is in the method of communication - how the compiler conveys the events of the week in a short time, and how potent (or indeed im-potent!) the words of the original speakers are.

I would like to see this conversation look at how radio and radio artists can respond to war. Do broadcasters have an obligation to support a war effort, or is it even unethical to cheerlead / stand behind the President without question?

## **Steering and Flaming Chris Lydon - September 26, 2001**

On radio I would not allow [a caller to] lurch into rhetorical explosion; on radio everyone would hear abusive righteousness as an attack on the conversation itself. Rant makes lousy radio, including rant from callers. Mary McGrath is my authority on the point that it takes a heap of planning and construction to make a radio conversation deliver authenticity, and maybe Mary should comment on these recent posts. But here's also to [the] hard questions about the courage and creativity required of broadcasters. I heard the Rush-meister this afternoon trying to fantasize himself into a frenzy about Peter Jennings' loyalty to President Bush on September 11. The rage-jockeys who were trashing Bush three weeks ago are now presuming to police our salutes! The ordinary street conversations I hear are not fooled.

## **The Nearest Jugular** **Chris Lydon - September 27, 2001**

These conversations are possible on the radio, maybe much better than on the Web. Middle East conversations are the hardest, but we've done them as best we could with many people I'm eager to talk with anew, including for example Bernard Lewis and Edward Said at different ends of the "Orientalism" argument about Islam and the West. Abortion pales by comparison with "Arabs and Israelis" as the subject on which people don't want to hear what they don't want to hear. But let's agree it is time to listen afresh. Is there a classroom exercise in Talk Radio that gets head out of sand but doesn't lunge reflexively for the nearest jugular? Jay Allison and Mary McGrath, help us out.

## **Patience, Penetration and Gray Haired Guests** **Mary McGrath - September 27, 2001**

It's easy to get impatient with the Arab/Israeli story. This isn't talking about one more peace offering or a Rose Garden handshake. This requires a penetrating look at the US role historically in the Middle East. I would definitely do the story and lean on guests with some gray hair and perspective and without ranting callers. I'd expect to learn something and I hope others would too.

## **The Conversational Dynamic** **Jay Allison - September 27, 2001**

Can't you hear him saying that?  
Jay Allison and Mary McGrath, help us out."  
Now I REALLY feel like I'm on the Chris Lydon show.

The best conversations, on the air or anywhere, are not bipolar. There is give and take, and compromise and discovery.

It's diplomacy vs. war.

I'm interested in the interplay here between the actual conversational dynamic amid the discussion of conversational dynamic, the insistence of content in the midst of form, the use of internet dialogue to discuss radio dialogue and the questions that arise about controlling either one.

On the radio, you have the advantage of INVISIBLE control. Chris or Mary -- or Rush or G. Gordon -- can simply disconnect a caller when they're done with him. The caller is a passenger and can be ejected from the vehicle any time, and he can't get back in.

On the web, anyone can hijack a conversation. Even destroy it. It's more like real life.

On the Internet, the host does not rule. He can try, by applying a little energy here, a little discouragement there. He can cajole, persuade, thrust and parry, know when to disappear and when to

shout. If he has enemies, they can do the same. They have the same powers. Somehow, the community decides. A kind of conversational order can emerge through a mysterious community consensus. Leaders pop up for a moment and disappear. Shunning is a tool. But if enough people agree to have the conversation, it can keep going without falling into anarchic disarray or bipolar war.

I fear the conversational dynamic in the culture right now. The President has framed the debate in binary terms internationally "are you with us or against us?" that can too easily be echoed on the streets, dividing patriot from patriot.

Public radio has the chance to create a national, skeptical, nuanced, complicated, evolving conversation, and that's a truly patriotic act.

## **No Plugs**

### **Jackson Braider - September 27, 2001**

So, Chris and Mary, how do we translate the democracy of the web -- the equality of all voices -- into radio? One difference between talk radio and this kind of internet discourse is that the latter doesn't happen in real time. You can't interrupt -- there's no clock, no station break to set temporal boundaries. As Jay says, you as host and producer can't pull the plug

In the course of WBUR's recent collaboration with Five Alive, one of the things that struck me about the BBC process is that callers could go on, unimpeded, at a goodly length. Of course it was dull from time to time, but it was a striking fact nonetheless. It felt, strangely, not unlike an internet discourse, where the participants could run their trains of thought to the end of the line.

## **Who Are We\_Now?**

### **Suzanne Petrucci - September 28, 2001**

I have been was listening to Neil Conan on NPR. He has been letting callers and guests go on for much longer than I am used to. I have to say that in the case of Cesar Pelli, the architect, I was very thankful yesterday. On the other side he let a person go on longer than was useful it seemed but you could also sense that that person felt good (and astonished) about being allowed to say his full piece. I was impatient listening to this fellow but I felt gratified that he was treated with dignity. Don't forget that we are also answering the unasked question "who are we?" and "who are we now?"

## **Fora, Fauna, Flora**

### **Mary McGrath - September 28, 2001**

We never did a Middle East program where we DIDN'T get flak from both sides. Jay mentioned the nternet. I'm not sure anyone has figured out the best way to use the internet during a radio show. I was never satisfied with simply reading a provocative e-mail. It just kind of falls flat or worse, the e-mailer

can't respond or clarify. We've always had good fora (and fauna and flora too) on our website which served as a way of "continuing the conversation." How else to use the internet live on radio?

## **Ears, Eyes**

**Jay Allison - September 28, 2001**

Drawing on my vast experience as a call-in show host, I'd mention the Photography-on-the-Air show we did with Nubar Alexanian at our local station. Callers could see his work on the web and call to talk about it. Nubar described the photos for the car crowd.

## **R-e-s-p-e-c-t**

**Jackson Braider - September 29, 2001**

The difference between a Lydon talk show -- and I'm tipping my hat to both Chris and Mary in this -- and a G. Gordon or Rush experience is the issue of respect. Once callers jumped through various unseen hoops, they could expect a certain measure of respect once they hit the air.

I think this is also possible on the internet, but as Mary points out, there is a different clock between radio and here. It is also a different beast -- writing as opposed to speaking, unreal time as opposed to real time. I wonder if we expect too much of talk radio. How do you balance "thoughtfulness" and \*real\* time? Is it possible to give that sense of immediacy on-line -- the kind of sensation that only a clicking clock can offer?

## **A-r-t**

**Suzanne Petrucci - September 29, 2001**

I don't know, correct me please, but as I remember talk radio (at least as it began on NPR during the Gulf War with Daniel Schorr on TOTN) [its mission] was to:

- give us information ( up to the moment)
- give us as good and varied analysis on the issues as was available
- and, perhaps most importantly, be a constructive way for people to express their anxieties, fears and even homegrown wisdom. (Talk radio as valve on a pressure cooker).

I believe that talk radio still serves those functions, especially at this moment.

What Chris and Mary (at their best) gave us was something more refined. So maybe to do that, the input from callers had to be more controlled. But again so much has come from unusual places that being too controlled may work against the emerging of something wonderful and unexpected. I think a lot also depends on the host being open, on top of things (moment by moment awareness) as well as creative (or poetic), graceful and showing loving kindness ( insofar as possible).

## **A Living Thing** **James Carmody - September 29 2001**

The thing I always liked about Chris' show was that it was conversation as though your life depended on it. It wasn't an 'interview' or a 'discussion'. It is more than that - of course it is unpredictable, that's the vitality of it - it becomes a living thing and develops a life of its own. I think a host like Chris has a driving curiosity and is passionately interested in the world and their place in it and takes nothing for granted as 'right' or 'wrong' or 'true' or 'false'. Chris' show was the only one I've ever found in which those characteristics ruled. NPR is left with the same dreary predictable stuff - the intellectual wheels can practically be heard grinding away. I suspect that there is a bureaucratic filtering process that somehow eliminates people like that - they're like any artist - a little dangerous - not sure where they will go next. But that's what kept me listening - and I suspect a lot of the others.

## **A Lydonism** **Naomi Gurt Lind - October 1, 2001**

I have a favorite Lydonism, a quotation from the possessor of the dulcet vox himself:

It was on a show about rock & roll, and someone called in with a highly unorthodox viewpoint, one with which it was patently obvious Mr. Lydon disagreed. He listened, took a deep breath, and said: "Everyone's entitled to an opinion on The Connection."

As the news outlets get more and more inundated with official speak, with the unintended (?) consequence of tuning out the voice on the street, we need a news inlet, somewhere where all our voices matter.

## **What, Where, Who?** **Jay Allison - October 9, 2001**

Mary? Chris?

Here's the thing: there are hundreds of public radio stations around the country with local news staffs, hosts, reporters, producers and local call-in shows. Some of those people are likely to be here at Transom.org, trolling for ideas. This is a time of national and international concern and all the networks are working overtime, albeit often redundantly and spoon-fed. It's a hard job these days. The trick is to separate information from disinformation. Truth is the first casualty, etc. It also remains a time of mourning and reflection, despite the new demands on our attention. There is powerful need now for thoughtful national media coverage, full of debate and poetry and history and complexity -- although it's questionable whether that is happening much -- but in the midst of this, what can a local broadcaster do?

You know something about this because you made the transition from local to national. You know the differences between talking to all your fellow citizens and to your community. You have had to frame national issues for a local audience, or find local points of focus in larger questions.

What would your advice be to local public broadcasters now? Where would your attention be? Who would you be talking to, so that you contributed to community understanding, uncovered truths, and avoided a pale reflection of an already anemic national media forced to talk to itself, consultants, retirees and flaks.

## **Think Globally\_ Jackson Braider - October 9, 2001**

One of the curious elements describing the discussion of September 11 is the absence of local sensibility. Think globally, apply universally. But we are a nation of localities and special interests, each with its own agenda and mission.

## **An Audenism Chris Lydon - October 10, 2001**

Jackson Braider's last entry on the global/local axis and Jay Allison's posting with local broadcaster's in mind recall to me [the] W.H. Auden line that Mary and I used to toss around when The Connection first stretched beyond Boston and we worried about losing our flavor. "A poet's hope," Auden said, is "to be, like some valley cheese, local, but prized elsewhere." Paraphrasing another great poet, Tip O'Neill, all conversation is local. We were in fact reluctant to see The Connection "go national," and wouldn't have done it if we didn't think there was a communitarian glue in the program's tone of voice that would keep it from being a sort of "news from nowhere" forum of voices anywhere out of the phone network. Every big town needs its own hard, patient, smart conversation on this crisis and now this war. But then I have to add that the local so-called talk shows since September 11 are driving me nuts. They're the price we pay for free speech--not the exercise of free speech. Never do you hear doubt, curiosity, pain. Never do you hear hope, history, caution. Never do you hear all the marks of the conversations that you and I, all of us, are actually in on. I'm actually getting hooked on the awfulness of these rant shows--starting with Howard Stern on the very day of the attack who said in so many words: there are too many people in the world already and we should start by wiping out Iran (yes) and the Palestinians. This has been the level of the toxic spewing of the radio greats: make Afghanistan glow in the dark; ship all undocumented immigrants out of this country immediately; better 10 million dead Muslims than 1 dead American. And on and on, with what sounds like a taped cycle of five audience voices cheering on the studio war hero. As I opined earlier, popular "talk radio" is a comedy format that's just grotesque in a situation like this one. So my suggestion to public-spirited broadcasters would be: go on the air immediately with a call-in forum open to all that lets people speak in their own voice and refuses to let the leather-lung bullies and cocktail comedians take over. I'd get the conversation started today by asking people what it means to be carrying a flag on your car--or not to be carrying a flag. Rudolph Giuliani's performance in New York makes you believe that a lot of mayors out there could host these conversations, and might want to. Town moderators, too. High School principals. There's a historian on every college campus that could lead the discussion. And then there are church folk, social workers, psychiatrists. The key would be to refine and tune the conversation until it sounded like something you've heard over your own kitchen table--until, in the Auden line, it forms a sort of audio postcard you could send to the rest of the country.



## **Cheese, Anyone?**

**Jay Allison - October 10, 2001**

Great cheese quote from Auden.

I like your exhortation to local stations to drag in the community wise ones and put them on the air to moderate local conversation. That could work. Has anyone here tried that? Heard that?

What are you hearing on local air, besides the usual ranting and stuff piped in from elsewhere? Have you heard anything good? I'm particularly interested in what small town radio stations (like ours) might be doing--places with no university, no obvious connection to recent events but still rocked by them, places like most of non-urban America.

What we did (lacking a regular talk show) was put out a call to our listeners asking them to phone our voice mail and tell us what they were thinking about, to offer their useful thoughts to their neighbors ("useful" was key, I think). The response was terrific. We used almost all of it on air. Some of it is here on the Transom or on the APM site.

## **Behind The Curtain**

**Viki Merrick - October 10, 2001**

The question of what to do locally is somewhat a trick. We did have one call in show here in Woods Hole with a Rabbi (and a radio rabbi at that!) and a psychiatrist. The response was surprisingly quiet, and not very evocative or provocative. I find I have grown absolutely allergic to most talk radio these days - thoughtlessly venomous or uninspired and in both cases remarkably repetitive.

An excellent project was Jay's listener call to share SOMETHING. I found those responses far more meaningful, well thought out and yet seemingly spontaneous in their frankness.

Maybe the Listener Line offers the genuine sanctuary of a confessional of some sort - behind the curtain, free to finish, be heard out and re-say. The mix of story and expression itself provides variation and air to a very dense and complex situation (right now).

Of course this is one kind of solution but doesn't address the need for smart conversation or good cheese - but perhaps it (this format) could serve as fodder for a larger conversation.

## **Raw Meat**

**Jackson Braider - October 11, 2001**

Duty and responsibility are elements of the societal glue, but these words mean different things to different communities. Americans feel duty-bound to support their president -- that's the only thing the polls are really saying -- but I think it's somewhere in the second verse of our national anthem (one of the many we're not singing these days) that speaks of "our cause, if it be just." I know. With this crowd,

I might as well be throwing raw meat to a pack of wolves, but where do we discover the interplay between "duty," "responsibility," and public radio?

## **Elements Of Conversation**

### **Jonathan Hyde - October 12, 2001**

Having consumed an appalling amount of news, discourse and analysis over the past month for someone who is drawing a weekly paycheck, I offer the following analysis of how Chris' Connection differed from all that is currently proffered.

The CL Connection demanded and returned receptiveness and respect for the conversation. These qualities differ markedly from politeness or political correctness. The concept of respect does not resent an unpopular opinion nor is receptiveness defined by valuing everyone's opinion equally. Rather these characteristics require an active listening and an honest attempt to assess the heart of the other's opinion. Respect and receptiveness are the pathways by which the imperfect vehicle of communication seeks to provide a connection between the vast distances of the consciousness of two human beings.

The technical/procedural quality of the CL Connection, as detailed in several exchanges above, was also beyond reproach. Callers were stirred into the mix judiciously and with consideration for the direction of the show. Chris' deft hand should also not be understated. Understanding when to interpose (not interrupt), when to push a point, and the smoothing out of the inherently scattered conversation into a wobbly but solidly progressive direction must be derived from an innate sense and considerable practice before reaching this level. Suffice to say that "Let's try to shove in one more call before the hour. You'll have to be quick." and "Let me interrupt you . . ." and "Let me summarize your point . . ." misses this point entirely.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the CL connection was its attempt to engage the complexity of an issue. Let's ignore most media which embraces failure on this score by active avoidance. It takes poise and restraint to resist the urge to say "We have only a minute before the break and we haven't discussed this last topic on my list, so let me ask you professor, in one sentence or less, Would you describe the response of the Muslim world to America's recent actions as enthusiastic or restrained. What gets left out of the response is the nuance and the understanding that a full Connection program would provide. The quality of the listeners, guests and host is another important distinction between the Connection and nearly everything else.

That these discussions can take place in a "public" fora without some Smithian invisible hand censoring the puerile amongst us speaks to the quality of the participants. Perhaps there is more "guidance" than I give credit for. But even given that a certain amount of censoring takes place we all know that fervid and on-topic discussion does not sustain itself.

There is a certain overlap between these points and they all reinforce and supplement each other to some degree. I offer these thoughts as a summation of previous sub-threads in this group and my thoughts on what is necessary for a good conversation that leads to a connection.

Let me also add that I welcome this forum for discourse, I enjoy having the opportunity to participate with a deliberate tone and in familiar comfort beyond the klieg lights and invisible shot clock of conventional radio. I apologize for the length of my response, as you can see I'm big on complexity and probably not well suited for a call-in show.

### **The Chattering Classes** **Mary McGrath - October 15, 2001**

Jonathan, You got it and you're more eloquent and articulate about it than I. The critical ingredient in the special sauce is a host who is just plain curious and likes ideas and people and conversation. It's pretty basic but the media isn't good at the basics. Jay asked earlier how local stations not in range of a university could get a conversation up and going post 9/11. I'd start by thinking of the most interesting people in town -- people whose house you'd love to be invited to for a dinner party. What Chris Lydon calls The Chattering Classes live everywhere. Maybe they're newspaper people, maybe they're local writers or adult ed teachers, maybe they're just citizens. You can always pipe others in by phone. The thing is to just do it. Try it and don't be afraid to screw up.

### **It's A Desert Out There** **benjamin walker - October 15, 2001**

just got back from a long desert driving trip ... listened to a lot of radio.. lots and lots of blabbering say nothing voices... I found myself thinking a lot about what it is that Chris and Co. did so well on the radio and I am glad I have the chance to add my two cents here... Chris said it's an "audio postcard" that you would be happy to send to the rest of the world. I like that except for the word postcard - a postcard only goes one way and the connection never used to be a one way thing. it was always a conversation. the goons that are doing the third rate talk shows will never ever get it - I think they truly believe that what people want is answers and information - and they are more than happy to give them this - they get off on it because this way insures that it is all about themselves - these frauds don't give a DAMN about conversation. they could care less about learning something - especially from some caller.

### **Pillow Talk** **Michael Joly - October 16, 2001**

Listening to the replay of Terry Gross interview novelist Jonathan Franzen (The Corrections) last night, I had a thought about the "Special Sauce" - the unique ingredient of great talk radio we've been talking about.

Different cooks have different secrets, but here's a tasting method that can be applied to all, let's call it the Transistor Radio in Bed Test.

Better than a table-top clock radio, a little hand held "transistor" is key. (I still love the use of that word - the name for an electronic switching device used to mean "portable radio receiver").

Get all cozy in bed and put the transistor radio on a pillow on tummy. Now, then. Do those voices coming out of the transistor radio seem like they belong in that intimate setting?

Is the "pillow talk" real?

## **More Cheese**

**Jay Allison - October 18, 2001**

Chris, I'll pose that question about the American flag to our listeners at WCAI/WNAN for our listener line. We'll see what we get, and if we get response that reaches beyond the community -- exceptional local cheese -- we'll post it.

We have a variety of it at our radio station. We air these tiny community portraits all day long, little stories of our neighbors that we go out and record.

I think they carry beyond our community, but they are especially good here. Each place has its own shorthand, its jargon. There is a genuine "we." The Cape and Islands are no different. That must be what you missed when you went from Boston to National.

We also have our local listener line, where people get to speak their minds for the record. Giving them that responsibility seems to work pretty well. We get a very high percentage of usable messages, recently relating to Sept. Voicemail has a very different dynamic than the guided conversation you, Chris and Mary, create. Advantages to both, but the great advantage you have is the depth and blend that you can build over an hour.

How to Build an Hour: A Manual. Please riff on this for the benefit of the commons.

## **Local Cheese**

**Jay Allison - October 18, 2001**

We have an occasional call-in show at our stations, and even more occasionally, I host it. I am a duffer, but enthusiastic to discover what fun it is. But the thrill for me is the localness, the sense of talking to an actual community that exists outside the context of the program. A couple weeks after the 11th, I hosted the show to talk about Bird Migration. The idea was to take a deep breath and look at the skies with something other than the memory of horror. This was the intro:

*"I'm Jay Allison and this is The Point. Today, Birds. That's right, a look back to the skies, with an appreciation for life ongoing. In our studio is Vern Laux, the Bird Man of Martha's Vineyard, and I can virtually guarantee that he will help expand your thinking in a positive direction for the next hour. An affirmation of life, of hope, the thing with feathers. Next on THE POINT here on 90.1 CAI Woods Hole Martha's Vineyard, and 91.1 WNAN Nantucket. First, this news update..."*

We could get away with this locally because we look at the same sky, the same birds. We have something tangible in common. Place. I don't know if it would have worked as a national show. Doing this show was also like a community gathering where people get together who haven't seen each other in a while. Everyone had been focusing on tragedy, on the nation, and in this hour they could say... "hey, how are things over on YOUR island?"

The full flavor of local cheese like this is best appreciated by locals, I think.

I wonder if you, Chris and Mary, think of just staking out a place and starting over fresh, local.

## **Exotic Smells**

### **Jackson Braider - October 18, 2001**

When you say: The full flavor of local cheese like this is best appreciated by locals, I think you're forgetting the exoticness of local cheese to outsiders. I suspect that that was one of the brilliant aspects of the Kuralt On the Road pieces. Locals and outsiders have a different sense of smell.

On the other hand, Chris and Mary, when you made the switch from local to national, did you feel obliged to shift your subject base? It didn't seem that way to me. You both seem to recognize that there are different ways of defining "locality" -- Jay, you speak of "locality" of place, but there is also locality or community of interest. Birdwatchers in New Mexico are going to be intrigued by what birdwatchers on the Cape and Islands see. Chris and Mary seemed to bounce from locality to locality in terms of community of interest.

And yet there is also a line that distinguishes the local from the provincial. I'd be interested to hear where and how Chris and Mary tried to feel their way through a maze that involved the local, the provincial, and the national.

## **Searchers**

### **Chris Lydon - October 19, 2001**

At Symphony Hall in Boston a couple of years ago, an usher at a Yo-Yo Ma concert (a moonlighting actor, as it turned out) took my ticket with a discreet nod of recognition and said, sotto voce: "I am a searcher, too." It was one of the dearest and most acute comments I can remember, and it comes as close to giving away the special sauce as I think is wise. The program that Mary McGrath and I worked on for nigh onto seven years was animated, deep down, by a huge hunger to know this world and our places in it. My curiosity about almost everything is genuine, and I don't blush to admit it. It's not that I don't love the distractions of life; God knows I've spent altogether too much energy over the years (as journalists are wont to do) on digressions from the main road. But I love more the spirit of Proverbs 4:7: "Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding." The point about our radio work is just that for all the fun we have had with it every day, we were never kidding around. And we never thought of our show as mere entertainment. We had high-school students

on the production staff at points, but we were all grown ups. We care intensely about the work. We love each other. We never fought. We slaved at the job. We never stopped trying to make it better. We are unutterably grateful that so many people remember programs that "worked." Small wonder that people remember programs with musicians, and programs and guests and callers that had an aura of spiritual mystery about them. In conceiving the program and the daily iterations, the general hunch that Mary and I shared was that most media is in the business of kidding people. Our project, trying not to sound too solemn about it, was to keep applying the ol' shit detector: is this story worth it? Is this book notion new, or sound, or interesting? Narrowly we were always asking: has it been done already, most particularly on NPR by the likes of TOTN or Terry Gross or ATC? And more broadly, we began by asking what if any light a program might shed on the path to truth and beauty. A lot of celebrity book writers were automatically, eagerly embraced; but with all of them Mary was relentless in trying to get an hour of radio, not an hour of "book." Mary was always asking: what is the question on listeners minds for which this author-expert-guest might have an ideal answer? The emphasis, that is, was on listeners and questions, not on the visiting celeb's latest production. The inescapable goad, ten times a day, was: what's the question for callers? These all came to be habitual preparation for every program, the starting point for a long meeting we had each day at noon.

## **Mary, Are You Out There?**

**Jay Allison - October 20, 2001**

Genuine curiosity. And genuine enthusiasm. When we ponder public radio's "core values," I put those high on the list. They are the pillars of Authenticity.... a value which, by definition, you can't fake. That's what I heard on the Connection. It was not only the product of an institution we heard, but also the loving labor of individuals...listeners included.

Failure is how we learn. What were your worst shows? Why? Was it often your fault? Can you save a terrible show half-way through? Do you remember moments you found the key to a bad guest and unlocked him? Can a great caller turn things around... do you keep some in reserve?

How did you deploy staff? You had a good-sized team. Most local shows don't. we don't even have a phone computer thing... they just hold up a dry marker board in the control room....("Mary from Boston on Line One!") Mary, are you out there...?

## **Paragraphs? We Don't Need No Stinking Paragraphs**

**Jay Allison - October 20, 2001**

May I also say that Chris's utter disregard for paragraph breaks in this topic reminds me of his on-air intros which were paragraph-less tours-de-force of galloping prose.

That's another difficult-to-imitate flavor in the secret sauce.

Hockenberry sometimes pulled it off. And Suarez. The trick is getting us to be absolutely enthralled by something we had no idea interested us at all. The Lydon Intro was tops at this.

Chris, did you do those at the last adrenaline-filled minutes? Did you riff them out loud and then type? Do they have uneven right-hand margins on the page?

## **Sprezzatura** **Suzanne Petrucci - October 20, 2001**

Though it's not for Chris or Mary to say about themselves, we can say that they have a "sprezzatura". (I just came across this word so I have to use it).

Sprezzatura- doing difficult things with an effortless mastery or the art of effortless mastery. Sprezzatura is anything but effortless: mastery of any skill requires more perspiration than inspiration: the social mask or the disjunction between appearance and reality. (Coined in 1528 by Count Baldassare Castiglione in his famous Book of the Courtier, synthesizing the ideals of the medieval courtly gentleman with the new "Renaissance man.")

Chris's long paragraph made me go right to this quote I have saved for about 25 years:

From Jacob Bronowski "The Visionary Eye": The Nature of Art "\_there is a common pattern to all knowledge: what we meet is always particular, yet what we learn from it is always general. In science we reason from particular instances to the general laws that we suppose to live behind them, and though we do not know how we guess at these laws, we know very well how to test them. But in a poem the specific story and the detailed imagery that carries it create in us an immediate sense of the general. The experience is made large and significant precisely by the small and insignificant touches. Here the particular seems to become general of itself. The detail is it's own universal."

How did you, Chris and Mary, manage to keep up with all of the reading listening, and looking and reflection necessary to be well prepared for each show? Ten hours a week to be well prepared with thought to the oncoming weeks boggles my mind. And still Chris, you managed to send me a heartfelt quick note about a clipping I sent you.

It can't be the just the sauce. It's not merely the recipe. It's the hard work, carefully chosen ingredients I am sure but also or more the sensibility that puts them together. That's why I say Art. I think that's what attracts and inspires the callers too.

I notice the callers are very different now, the sensibility, the personal world view is very different.

## **When The Guest Ditches, And Other Matters** **Mary McGrath - October 22, 2001**

Failure is how we learn. What were your worst shows? Why? Mary from Boston here. Failure is indeed how we learned Jay. There were some classic failures -- when the Dalai Lama left after the first half to catch a NASA space shuttle launch; when the singer Nina Simone showed up a half hour late and then

decided she didn't want to talk; when the science fiction writer Harlan Ellison walked out of the studio midday through the program because Chris called him a science fiction writer when he'd told a producer he didn't want to be called a science fiction writer.

Was it often your fault? Can you save a terrible show half-way through? I would say those ones weren't our fault. You can sort of save a show by adding more guests or playing music in the case of Nina Simone. The callers saved the Harlan Ellison show in a rather spectacular way. Admittedly Chris isn't much of a sci fi fan and so the callers rushed in to offer their own explanations [as to] why Harlan Ellison was offended and they grabbed copies of books and stories he'd written and read selections of his prose on the air to gently guide us to the end of the hour.

The key to a great show is an interesting angle on a story or an interesting topic with a very strong advocate. We'd pre-interview guests thoroughly and "trade up" throughout the day and even into the next morning the get the best possible people on the program. I have impossibly high standards and the fact that seven producers shared the goal of making each program the very best it could be is proof of how amazing our staff was. Our post-show editorial meeting was the most fun of the day. For an intense hour we would evaluate the program we'd just finished and talk about show ideas for the next day and the rest of the week. Visitors who sat in were always amazed at the fun and intelligence and intensity of the group. A staff of people of very varied interests, ages and backgrounds weighed in on nearly everything. We all shared a basic curiosity about life and we learned a lot from each other. One woman is a writer whose interests were mainly literary. She couldn't care less about national politics but the best of those shows it seems were the ones that she got excited about before hand.

We'd often dare to be boring, but the standard was to be edgy and provocative. We all labored over writing billboards and opens trying out different leads and copy on each other all afternoon and into the late evenings at home. We didn't worry about balancing every program left and right. That creates a MacNeil/Lehrer kind of effect and the show can become predictable and boring. Why add the Jesse Helms or the voice of an opposition politician if you know exactly what they're going to say? We could often count on our callers to even out a guest with strong opinions. This is not to suggest that controversial shows were one sided; on most shows we'd have call-outs

- people we'd call out to for a quick comment or an interesting perspective that would take the second part of the hour in a different direction.

The pace of the show was very important too. The phone screener signaled the callers to be quick and we'd gently cut them off if they weren't. We continually improvised and didn't have a set script for any program. Chris never had a set list of more than a couple of questions to get the show going. That way we were open to digression and surprise. Too often on the radio you hear a host working through a list of questions and he or she will miss a critical follow up because they're following a set format.

## **The Soufflé Can Fall** **Chris Lydon - October 23, 2001**

Mary doesn't remember how she raked me once for an introduction to a Charles Mingus hour that didn't explain who Mingus was (musically, emotionally, politically)in the pantheon between Duke Ellington

and the Monk generation. She was severe and I was wounded, but we absorbed the general lesson that these billboards and introductions had to be addressed to the everyday Martian, and they had to be tested on each other for rhythm and fun as well as clarity of information. My daughter Amanda, who's a chef, says the joy of cooking is all about learning from failures; was it not among Julia Child's giant contributions that the soufflé could fall--so could the chicken, on the floor--and we could still feel good about ourselves. In interviewing for talk radio, the prime worry, the definition of failure, was the program that did not bring out a guest's main idea: amazing how people can get so absorbed in their golfer's wobble and never quite come up with a swing! Joan Didion didn't really want to talk about her own book. Lots of other people are shy about their own ideas. I tell every guest: think hard a minute (and don't tell me before the program) what you want the dentist's wife in Westwood to remember when the conversation is over. The flip side is guests that surprise themselves with digressions and even with passion that they didn't expect to share on the radio. Harold Evans, a.k.a. Mr. Tina Brown, wrote a photo-history love letter to the American Century, in which I sensed the emotional mainspring was his own memory as a teenager of American Lend-Lease that saved England before the US entered WW2. So I worked him around to talking about FDR's adviser Harry Hopkins who delivered the promise to Churchill with a marvelous speech quoting the Book of Ruth: "whither thou goest.." And sure enough Harry Evans burst into big tears as he told the story. Andrew Sullivan cried on our show. I've cried on our show. Tears cover a multitude of sins, and failures, too. There are so many kinds of failures: too many guests, not enough guests; guests and callers that run on. I am often accused of interrupting people, but we made more mistakes letting people repeat themselves. Yes, callers can turn a show right around. Among our faves is a Christmas Eve show on "The Gift of the Magi," the O. Henry story and the idea of the perfect surprise gift: early on came a caller who with her husband was giving their best friends what they wanted above all... it was a child, as the story developed, and it was due on Christmas Day. The theologian in the studio, Harvey Cox, was overwhelmed, as I was, but the one superb call, as often, generated many, many more. The first caller sets the standard for the hour. With the novelist Kazuo Ishiguro, it helped immeasurably with a difficult novel, "The Unconsoled," that a pianist Andrew Rangel called in off the bat and explained to Ishiguro and to us what the novel really meant about music, culture, modernity, Europe, language and the rest. The last point about failures, if I may, is that we're often the worst judges of our flops and our hits, both. The listener may hear a failure when I felt a triumph, and vice versa; all the more reason to get back on the horse each time as if we were inventing the medium anew.

## **One Cheerful Voice**

**Chris Lydon - November 14, 2001**

We have this passion for conversation that doesn't insult our intelligence, or play power games around information; that's fundamentally egalitarian; that's forceful but forgiving; that covers at least suggestively the range of our curiosities and enthusiasms; that's continuing and somehow connected with its own memory and that builds up a feeling of non-exclusive "membership" in the on-going search. This is the Emersonian ideology that we discovered after a few years of doing the old, real Connection for a few years. Ralph Waldo Emerson's great teaching (he had a few) was about "the infinitude of the private man;" he said in effect that human beings were defined by their hunger, and their aptitude, for the experience of the universal soul. He anticipated modern brain science in understanding the equality of our mental equipment: we each and all have (very nearly) the mind of Aristotle. He loved conversation, and he was interested in everything. I am forever quoting his goal for



*The Dial*, the magazine he founded in 1840 with Margaret Fuller: he wanted *The Dial* to serve as "one cheerful voice amidst the din of mourners and polemics." That is, in his own even-tempered way he wanted to change the public conversation, just as we did and do. And then he did it! So, for a while, did we! And we'll do it again. I believe it all very passionately indeed, but sense sometimes that eyes glaze over... or people think I'm just pounding my chest. Basta!

Sing out if you want to pursue more particular themes. I'm still here...

All the best, Chris Lydon

# 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 Barlow

**Editors** - Viki Merrick, Sydney Lewis, Jeff Towne, Helen Woodward

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

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# 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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ATLANTIC PUBLIC MEDIA