THE WINSTON CHURCHILL MEMORIAL
TRUST OF AUSTRALIA

REPORT BY RICHARD FIDLER
2011 FELLOW

TO INVESTIGATE NEW FORMS OF PUBLIC RADIO:

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Signed
Dated

RICHARD FIDLER
20 December 2011
INTRODUCTION

In 2005 I began presenting a program called Conversations with Richard Fidler on ABC Local Radio. Today it reaches listeners in most of Australia’s big metropolitan centres, regional cities and right into the smallest outposts that can receive ABC radio. Each day’s program is also podcast to anyone in the world with a digital device who wants to listen at a time of their choosing.

In commissioning such a program, the ABC was gambling that listeners might be wanting something richer and less hectic at that hour. The program’s format is unusual; most talk radio is built around the convention of the seven minute interview, flowing into news, topical talkback, promotional spots and music. Conversations is a continuous hour-long interview, mostly with just a single guest. There is no talkback and music is used only rarely. The guest is always present with me in the studio. Despite (or perhaps because of) its unconventional nature, Conversations quickly found a substantial radio audience. The Conversations podcast is regularly listed as the most downloaded podcast in the whole of the ABC: in 2011 we expect to record just under four million downloaded individual programs.

ABC Local Radio is all about bringing community voices to their air, to reflect the community to itself. Right from the start we had a bias towards guests who are unknown to the general public; people with good stories to tell, whose lives resemble those of our listeners.

Conversations often welcomes authors, public figures, creative people and thinkers, but it was these ‘unfamous’ guests that listeners seemed to respond to most strongly. We thought this was because listeners could measure their own lives against them more readily: it’s easier to compare your own journey to a nurse or a taxi driver than to a former cabinet minister or Hollywood star.

Placing ‘unfamous’ interview subjects alongside the famous ones had another pleasing effect; the listener could quite rightly infer that the stories of the everyday person have the same weight and significance as those of more celebrated individuals. We found that by bringing ‘relatable’ voices to the program over an hour, we could at times explore and explain some very large and complex issues. For these reasons, my producer and I began to imagine we were perhaps molding a different kind of public radio, bringing large audiences to interesting stories and ideas.

Then in 2008 I began listening to podcasts from the US of This American Life, The Moth, Radiolab, and Planet Money and saw at once that the people behind these shows had gone some way further down the same road we were traveling on.

These shows were all, to some degree, based on well-crafted storytelling, and I realised that the title of my own program was somewhat misleading. Conversations isn’t really so much of a ‘conversation’ – my voice takes up a very small part of the airtime - it’s really a form of guided storytelling. My role on air is to draw those stories from my guests and link them to form an overarching narrative that hooks the listener and holds them captive to the radio.

In America the new public radio attracts large, diverse audiences, and the enthusiasm of its listeners is near-cultish. The new public radio is not a cottage industry, playing to small, boutique audiences; it’s wildly popular. And, as I discovered, it also serves to subtly restore the frayed bonds of community.

These programs can be heard online here:

www.themoth.org
www.thisamericanlife.org
www.radiolab.org
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NEW FORMS OF PUBLIC RADIO

Highlights
- Visiting the production office of This American Life and interviewing Ira Glass, New York City.
- Attending a live performance of The Moth and meeting with Catherine Burns and Sarah Austin-Jenness, the producer/presenters of The Moth Radio Hour, New York City.
- Meeting with Laurie Taylor and the producers of Thinking Allowed and attending a live broadcast of the program, BBC Radio, London.
- Visiting the production offices of Radiolab, WYNC New York City.

Conclusions
- Public radio is thriving at a time when many ‘traditional’ forms of news media are declining.
- Public radio in the United States is increasingly seen as a bastion of reason in an otherwise fevered media environment that would goad one section of the community against the other.
- The new public radio draws deeply upon our shared need for personal storytelling, a need that seems to be embedded in our very DNA.
- True stories are most powerful when told by the people who own them.
- Storytelling creates shared sympathies. Public radio is answering a longing in communities for connection and communion by bringing the stories of everyday people to the airwaves.
- Curiosity and discovery are infectious on radio; more so than any other medium.
- The new public radio likes to draw big audiences to rich, complex ideas.
- It speaks with natural, everyday language. It makes no pretense of omniscience and it avoids robotic ‘news-speak’.
- The new public radio is infused with a sense of invention, excitement and possibility. The best of these programs are creating a new language, a new radio aesthetic.

Dissemination & Implementation
- Introducing some of the many new ideas I’ve seen into my Conversations program. Conversations will grow into some new directions this year, and bringing more citizen’s voices onto the program will be the foremost priority. I’ve picked up several new strategies to locate and produce these voices as a result of this Fellowship.
- Broadcasting my interview with Ira Glass on my program.
- Making my findings freely available to my colleagues at ABC Radio. I’m very happy to speak about my findings at ABC radio forums.
- I’m pleased to report that some ideas (Jay Allison’s Sonic IDs) of bringing citizen’s stories onto the air are already being implemented by 612 ABC Brisbane.
PROGRAMME

19th - 24th September 2011
London, United Kingdom

• Met and interviewed Robin Ince and Sasha Feachem, co-presenter and producer of *The Infinite Monkey Cage*, BBC Radio 4, Bush House.

• Met Laurie Taylor, presenter of Thinking Allowed, and his production team. Attended a live broadcast of the program at BBC Radio 4, Broadcasting House.

24 September - 15 October 2011
New York City, USA

• Visited the production of *Radiolab* at WNYC. Spoke with producer Sean Cole and presenter Robert Krulwich.

• Attended live performance of *The Moth* for recording for *The Moth Radio Hour*, Housing Works Bookshop.

16 - 19 October
Woods Hole, Massachusetts, USA

• Attended recording of Arts and Ideas at WCAI.

• Met with Jay Allison and Viki Merrick of Atlantic Public Media.

• Participated in Transom’s Story Writing for Radio Workshop, led by Rob Rosenthal.

20 - 23 October
New York City, USA

• Met with Catherine Burns (Artistic Director, Presenter) and Sarah Austin-Jenness, (Producing Director, Presenter) of *The Moth Radio Hour* at their production offices.

• Met with and extensively interviewed Ira Glass, creator and host of *This American Life* at their production offices.
NEW FORMS OF PUBLIC RADIO

We have a calling to mission and public service that exists outside the marketplace and squarely in the civic realm... We have the chance to help citizens speak for themselves, to one another, directly...

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.

- Jay Allison, founder of Atlantic Public Media & Creator of The Moth Radio Hour¹.

What Do I Mean by the ‘New Public Radio’?
In some ways there’s nothing ‘new’ about it at all: the new public radio is really a rediscovery of the power of the oldest form of communication: oral storytelling. It’s a marriage of digital technology and radio to bring stories and ideas to a wide audience, one listener at a time.

The need for storytelling seems to be embedded in our DNA (in Cape Cod radio producer Rob Rosenthal told me there’s a school of thought that says the correct name for our species should be Homo Narrans, which translates as ‘storytelling human beings’). This ancient human practice is made anew in the new public radio and disseminated instantly all over the world through broadcasting, podcasting and social media.

The new public radio sounds different because it’s often consumed differently. The broadcast audiences catch these shows at the appointed time on the station’s schedule, but the podcast audiences (almost as big as the broadcast audience) enjoy them on their iPods at a time of their choosing - riding the bus, doing the ironing, walking the dog, washing the dishes, strolling to work - when their minds are free from distraction. These programs can’t really be picked up in snatches: they demand your full attention.

The program makers tend to follow the same rule book:

• Create an immersive experience for your listeners. Use the intimacy of radio to take them into other lives, other places.
• Be alive to wonder, paradox, weirdness, humour and compassion.
• Bring your listeners a compelling, surprising true story, and then offer them an idea that emerges from it.
• When telling a true story, have it told whenever possible by the person who lived it.
• Speak with a natural, intimate voice; avoid pomposity, cliches and false sentiment. Don’t talk like a newsreel. Don’t try to sound omniscient.
• Embrace the fact you want your listeners to feel something. Never be corny with it.
• Use new media to reach a bigger audience beyond the broadcast.
• Never, ever be boring.

The new public radio is flourishing at a time when commercial radio is all too often used as a platform to antagonize one section of the community against another. It creates shared sympathies between different groups of citizens.

BBC Radio has a long established place at the heart of Britain’s cultural life. American public radio is younger, but has grown in popularity and public esteem. Most of these great new programs live in the United States and its public radio culture appears to be more vibrant.

The three key creative figures in the invention of new public radio are Jay Allison, Ira Glass and Jad Abumrad. These three are fully aware that they’re making a new form of public radio and they want to inspire other great new programs to sprout up all over the world.

Ira and Jay don’t guard their secrets jealously: they’re like musicians with an exciting new sound - they want to inspire hundreds of other new bands to spring up all over the place.

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2 *The New York Review of Books* reports that, ‘In polls, public radio is rated as the most trusted source of news in the nation. The audience for most of its programs dwarfs the number of subscribers to *The New York Times* or *The New Yorker*, or the number of people who read even the biggest best sellers’. 
Radio gets inside us. Lacking ‘earlids’, 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.  

~Jay Allison

I met Jay Allison at his home base in Cape Cod Massachusetts. Jay is a protean figure in American public radio; a nationally renown broadcaster with a local focus. Jay is the founder of a production company (Atlantic Public Media), the creator and producer of many nationally syndicated public radio shows, including The Moth Radio Hour. He founded PRX Public Radio Exchange to disseminate and exchange public radio content.

He even built his local NPR station WCAI Public Radio, which broadcasts to Cape Cod and Nantucket.

Jay also founded the Transom.org website which is a public resource and a kind of open university for people wanting to become involved in public radio. Transom’s mission is to channel new work and new voices to public radio.

Jay is the recipient of an extraordinary six Peabody Awards, America’s most prestigious broadcast media award, as well as the Edward R.Murrow Award for Outstanding Contributions to Public Radio. As a radio journalist his work has been featured on many public radio programs including This American Life and All Things Considered.

He continues to present a weekly program Arts and Ideas on NPR from Cape Cod Massachusetts where he lives. I observed Jay and his WCAI producer Viki Merrick put the program together.

Jay was an actor and theatre director until someone at NPR lent him a mic and a tape recorder. He says he was instantly struck by the possibility of citizen journalism, and then over the next 25 years he made hundreds of radio features, documentaries and series.

On the Transom website he writes,

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.

Jay’s approach to interviewing is similar to mine; he prefers to give his guests time and space to speak, and to listen rather than interrogate. His view is that the audience can ‘hear’ it when the interviewer is listening.

3 http://transom.org/?p=6987
4 Ibid.
More than anything it seems, Jay loves to bring the voices of everyday people to the air in ways that are completely arresting and fresh.

**Lost and Found Sound**
Digital recording technology is continually producing smaller, cheaper, and less obtrusive devices; radio producers can now record broadcast quality audio on their iPhones. Jay Allison has always found ways to use emerging audio technologies to bring new voices to the air.

*Lost and Found Sound*, a project which he co-produced for NPR's *All Things Considered*, used a simple device to bring new voices to the air: voicemail. On air he invited listeners to call in to a special voicemail line and talk about a precious audio artifact.

The response, he says, was extraordinary.

> Some of the recordings were intensely personal: the lullaby of an immigrant grandparent, the answering machine message from a child given up for adoption... a family's recording of an ancestor's eyewitness account of the Gettysburg Address...

Jay was delighted to find that the phone message itself would become the spine of the piece. The message itself was so fully of feeling and resonance:

> 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.

Ever since he began in public radio, Jay has been captivated by the idea of bringing the stories of local people to local listeners. He believes this is the calling of public radio.

When ‘curated’ properly, these stories have a subtle underlying force: they tend to build and reinforce the bonds of community, assuaging the petty irritations and rivalries that fester in communities by drawing the listener into the life of someone they might not have bothered to understand.

**The Sonic IDs**
That thinking led Jay to another way of bringing community voices to the air: a series of personal radio vignettes he called ‘The Sonic IDs’. In 2000 Jay started a new local NPR station WCAI in Cape Cod.

Every radio station will periodically run a station ID ('You’re listening to...'). For WCAI’s station IDs Jay created a series of short vignettes, slices of local life spoken by local citizens. These were called ‘The Sonic IDs’ (“No one likes the name”, Jay said, “but it’s stuck”.)

Here’s a typical Sonic ID transcript:

*(Upbeat jazzy piano music intro, continuing throughout piece.)*

**Announcer:** Eileen McGrath on Nantucket.

**Woman:** All right, here we go . . . now you’re going to see the correct way to put the wash on the line (the sound of wooden washing pins clipping on line in background). If it is a windy day, you’ve got to decide which way you’re going to stand, ‘cause otherwise you’ll have them wrapped around your head as you hang them up, you see?
If I were a careless laundry hanger, I’d do this . . . (disgruntled sigh). I just threw it over the line and then speared it with a couple of clothespins, very careless work. You should do it just exactly this way, so everything is ship shape . . . it’s a lost art. (Background jazz rises to fore.)

Announcer: You’re listening to WCAI, Woods Hole/ Martha’s Vineyard, and WNAN, Nantucket—the Cape and Islands NPR stations, a local service of WGBH, Boston.

(More jazz to end.)

The Sonic IDs are, says Jay:

Portraits, oral histories, poems, anecdotes, memories, fragments of life overheard. Their common denominator is a sense of place. They all happen here, and they make these radio stations sound like here, not anywhere else. And, they pop up all day long, during every national show around the clock, 30-60-90-second bursts of life as experienced or remembered by all of us who live here.

Jay wants to make these moments so arresting you have to stop what you’re doing and just listen. A Sonic ID will pop up suddenly after a news broadcast, or a science program with no fanfare or introduction. Suddenly the professional broadcaster gives way to the voice of a local waitress, a widow, a carpenter, a young mum or a scientist. The effect is startling: ‘the voices of our neighbors, taking us by surprise, are given equal weight with events overseas’.

The Sonic IDs became instantly popular. Locals became ‘stars’ in their own communities; people were approaching WCAI all the time to get on. Then Jay picked up in the Lost and Found Sounds idea and installed a voicemail line for people to call in with their stories.

Here’s another popular Sonic ID:

Man: I’m Michael McHone, a commissioner on the Nantucket Commission on Disabilities.

I was illustrating the parking permit to someone up by the Pacific Bank, and this woman approached me, and proceeded to rip me up and down the street about how I had ruined the parking permits for people like her on Nantucket, and she said "and furthermore, you’re not even disabled! Why are you sticking your nose into our business?"

At that point I had a leg that was an artificial limb that was very easy to remove, and I pulled my artificial leg off and flung it to the steps of the Pacific Bank.

Yes, I let my irritation get the best of me. But it proved the point to the lady that, yes, there are people who are disabled that don’t necessarily appear to be so, and that what we were trying to

5 http://www.current.org/cape&islands/cape0109sonic.html

6 Ibid.
do was put into place a good parking system, that would work for everybody, and we think we have. You’re listening to 90.1 WCAI . . .

(Background sounds of bustling restaurant)

Announcer: You’re listening to WCAI, Woods Hole/ Martha’s Vineyard, and WNAN, Nantucket—the Cape and Islands NPR stations, a local service of WGBH, Boston.

Jay says that listeners have told him that these little breaks not only contribute to community; they 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*.

Simple, cheap and powerful, the Sonic ID concept was picked up by many other public radio stations across America, earning Jay Allison one of his many Peabody Awards.

Transom.org

In a recent feature on the new American public radio, The New York Review of Books noted that, “this is the perfect moment to be a young radiohead. It’s like 1960s and 1970s cinema, with auteurs rewriting the rules.”

Jay Allison created Transom as an online gateway for these nascent auteurs who, inspired by Radiolab, The Moth and This American Life, want to find their way into public radio. From here people find a first step to creating their own podcast or internet radio site.

The Transom website defines the word as:

*A small hinged window above a door, allowing light and ventilation into hallways of older buildings. At magazine and newspaper offices, unsolicited manuscripts were submitted “over the transom.”*

Jay wants no creative soul to be discouraged by lack of ‘insider’ knowledge or technical mastery. Transom’s stated mission is to “channel new work and voices to public radio and public media. It offer tools, advice, and community.”

7 Ibid.

Many of the leading figures in the new public radio are essay contributors to Transom. Ira Glass, host of *This American Life*, has contributed a *Transom Manifesto*; which serves as a declaration of the principles and techniques of the new public radio, as well as a call to action for people who want to get involved.

Transom.org won the first Peabody Award ever given exclusively to a website.

**The Transom Story Workshop**

In 2011 Jay Allison and Transom began a new initiative: a story workshop to take place over several months in Woods Hole, Cape Cod, to teach a select group of students the techniques of making compelling public radio. Transom selected eight students from more than 80 applicants. Jay kindly invited me and Pam O’Brien to address the students and sit in on a workshop day.

The students were mostly (but not all) in their twenties, and had been drawn to public radio by *Radiolab, This American Life*, and *The Moth*. To them it seemed that public radio is like the new rock and roll.

On the workshop day, Rob Rosenthal, an experienced public radio figure, took the students through some of the principles of writing for public radio.

Some of Rob’s insights:

- **If we ‘see’ you in your story, we should see you like you’re dressed in mirrors.** If you, the reporter, insert yourself in your story, you should be there to reflect your subject.

- **Don’t make your subject a Plastic Jesus.** Avoid the temptation to resolve your story by turning your human subject into a saint.

- **Beware of exploding chickens.** Be wary of a sudden, distracting development in your story that will overwhelm the central theme in a cloud of mess and feathers. One student’s workshop story was a profile on a local artisan. In the course of his research he discovered evidence that subject may have been imprisoned on charge of domestic violence. Does he now incorporate that explosive revelation into his four minute story? How?¹⁰

- **In radio, silence is an exclamation mark.** When a story fades to silence for several seconds it profoundly emphasizes that moment before the silence. You have nothing else but that thought or sentence to hold and contemplate.

The Transom Story Workshop was so obviously valuable for its participants. ABC Radio might benefit in setting up a training scholarship that would send an outstanding new recruit to this workshop each year.

Jay Allison’s work demonstrates how public radio can bind local communities. With *The Moth Radio Hour* he shows how these intimate connections can play out on a national stage to a much bigger and more disconnected audience.

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¹⁰ In the end, it had to be cut.
It’s open-mike night at The Moth’s monthly story slam at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe in Manhattan. The events, where participants tell stories about their lives, are loose and spontaneous, and the emphasis is on authenticity… But Robert Hurst, his name picked from a hat to appear on stage, seems like a pro. With perfect timing and a booming voice, Mr. Hurst, 43, relates a humorous childhood tale about his grandmother in Louisiana preparing dinner for the family: squirrel casserole. “If you ate the brains,” he recalls, “you could make a wish.”

A young, sweat-drenched crowd of more than 200 people roars in approval. And the judges, picked from the audience, reward him with a score in the nines.

- New York Times feature on The Moth, 14 August 2009.11

The Moth is an American phenomenon which generates audiences three ways: it’s a series of live spoken-word events, which feed into radio show and a podcast. The Moth’s formula is simple: true stories, told live on stage, without notes.

Its website claims that, ‘Moth stories dissolve socio-economic barriers, expose vulnerabilities, and quietly suggest ways to overcome challenges and see with new eyes’. It’s a bold claim, but the program’s achievements bear it out. Since its beginnings in 1997 in New York, dozens of Moth events now happen every month across America. It’s spreading into Canada and Australia12. The Moth Radio Hour is broadcast across the United States and the podcast averages over a million downloads a month.

New York hosts several live Moth events a week, where people appear on a stage in a small venue - a bookshop, a cafe - and tell a story about their lives. Storytellers are mostly unknown to the general public, but occasionally, public figures such as Salman Rushdie, Sam Shepherd and Terri Garr will contribute a story. However, their presence is given as much weight as lesser-known figures. The point is to connect the audience with the storyteller as directly as possible; there is no lectern to hide behind, no piece of paper to fall back on.

Why ‘The Moth’?
The title was coined by its founder, the poet and novelist George Dawes Green. Green wanted to create in New York the feeling of warm summer evenings in his native Georgia. There was a tradition there of gathering on a friend’s porch and telling spellbinding tales. The screen door on the porch had a hole which would let in moths that were attracted to the light, and so the group started calling themselves The Moths.

The Moth began as a series of live events. As it attracted more storytellers and bigger audiences, the potential of The Moth to translate into public radio became obvious. Jay Allison saw it as a natural extension of the kind of citizen storytelling he loves and so he led the creation of The Moth Radio Hour, now broadcast across the United States on public radio, and The Moth podcast, which goes out to the world.


12 I hosted a recent MothUp event at the 2011 Brisbane Writers Festival.
Moth Live Events

The Moth live events have branched out from New York City into Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles and across the United States.

There are two kinds of Moth events:

- The Moth Main Stage, where stories are curated; each story is selected, and The Moth’s directors work with each storyteller to craft and present it.
- The Moth StorySLAM: storytelling competitions which allow someone in the audience, if their name is drawn from a hat, to come on stage and tell a story.

Every Moth event has a theme, such as ‘Family Gatherings and Ungatherings’, ‘Into the Wild’, ‘A More Perfect Union’, ‘Checkmate: Stories of Strategy’. Each story on the night is expected to loosely connect with that theme.

Storytellers are encouraged to craft their stories to hold an audience, and to give particular attention to their opening line. I think it’s hard to beat the opening line from Andy Christie’s mid-life crisis story from 2009:

So I’m 5,000 feet above Albany... I can see the horizon in every direction, when the girl who just pushed me out of the plane screams, “Wait! Wait! Your chute!!”...

I attended a Moth Story Slam event on a Tuesday night at the Housing Works bookshop in Manhattan. The queue started forming an hour and a half before the doors opened, and eventually stretched along two city blocks. Admission is cheap (eight dollars) and many in the queue were hoping to be one of the names drawn from a hat to tell a story. The stories were hit-and-miss, and I think that’s the point. Everyone wants their story to succeed, but there is no disgrace if it falls a bit flat. In this way experimentation is encouraged and shy people are emboldened to take part.

The Moth Main Stage is a larger, curated event: storytellers are more likely to be prominent literary and cultural figures. Interestingly, such figures are really put on their mettle; they’re stripped of many of the advantages that their status usually confers upon them. No degree of celebrity can help them if their story is weak. Famous guests like Salman Rushdie, Sam Shepherd and Malcolm Gladwell often sound unusually nervous, hoping their dinner party anecdote will go over as well as the earlier story from the retired police officer.

Each live event is recorded and stories are then selected for The Moth Radio Hour and The Moth Podcast.

Why The Moth connects

I visited The Moth’s offices on Broadway in New York City and enjoyed a long conversation with Catherine Burns (Artistic Director) and Sarah Austin-Jenness (Producing Director). Catherine and Sarah also co-present The Moth Radio Hour.

I asked Catherine Burns to explain the success of The Moth; the long queues to get in, the large and growing audience for the radio show and the podcast. How had something so old fashioned become so all-the-rage?

Catherine said, ‘Our media environment is very black and white. America is so divided right now, I fear for it. I think people are desperate to connect - to connect with someone different’. Catherine lit upon the difference between listening and listening. She told me, ‘George Dawes Green noticed that at a New York party, people don’t really listen, they’re just waiting for a break in the conversation so they can talk again and say something witty. I really want our audiences to learn to listen... and to practise listening when they come to The Moth’.
Making radio from Life’s Rich Tapestry
At times The Moth has featured some very unsympathetic storytellers - embezzlers, heroin addicts, drunk drivers - who can, at the very least, brings us some insight into their weaknesses. The act of listening to someone else’s story takes us inevitably into the skin of the storyteller, and to ‘incorporate the contradiction which may lead us, helplessly, to acceptance’ as Jay Allison says.

One of the great strengths of The Moth is the diversity of its storytellers. Public radio can be a daunting place to people who don’t use it very often, and so guests tend to be more articulate, more erudite than the average citizen. People who are marginalised, less-well educated and who work long hours are not so likely to find themselves on the air.

With Conversations I’m always conscious of this and I’m eager to bring in voices from the outer suburbs and the country, the voices of the marginalised, as well as working people who often struggle to find the time to appear on radio. Ideally, listeners will wonder: who on Earth will I hear from today? An astronaut or a driving instructor?

Likewise The Moth wants to dismantle the real and perceived barriers that keep people with a good story at bay. Catherine and Sarah (and Jay Allison) take pains to ensure that The Moth isn’t diminished by its own success; that the voices of the shy, the socially excluded aren’t crowded out by articulate self-promoters looking for a public profile or a book deal.

The Story Slam format keeps one door open for everyday people to participate - it’s cheap to get in to the venue and it’s easy to put your name in a hat. Would-be contributors can also find their way onto the stage through The Moth’s website (themoth.org). Anyone can email a one-minute story pitch and get tips on how to tell their story effectively. The Moth also uses a voicemail service where people can make their pitch on the phone. The Moth’s producers can quickly discern who might make a good contributor.

The Moth Outreach Program
The Moth also has a long-running Outreach Program, which offers story telling workshops to students and marginalised adults living in New York City. They work with teenagers and adults in rehabilitation programs as well as homeless men and women. The results have often been stunning; The Moth Radio Hour has given a microphone to many such storytellers who have compelling tales to tell from the margins of city life. It makes for rich, surprising radio that acquaints many listeners with a side of life that would otherwise be hidden from them, and helps them find points of commonality.

Ultimately The Moth’s greatest asset is its ability to surprise its listeners. Jay Allison sees this as the point of difference in the landscape of polite public radio.

Public radio is kinda safe. When a story starts you always feel like it’s going to be tidy, well produced, polite... With The Moth you don’t always know what’s going to happen. The story starts and it’s from somebody you don’t normally hear on public radio and they’re talking about a topic that we don’t usually talk about on public radio... and they’re good stories.

The other thing I like about The Moth is that when you listen to the radio you tend to forget it pretty quickly... With The Moth you hear some of these stories and you can’t get them out of your head. And you even tell them to other people as if they were your own. And then it makes you think about: what stories do I have...?

13 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rqU1FVPmXZs
I think that at some animal level what we’re doing is so simple. It really is just old-fashioned storytelling. We’re very particular that we get people who anyone could relate to... And then we want the story to be a fantastic yarn. If you can’t attract people with that... It’s like giving out candy. We’re not making it hard for people - we’re making it really easy.  

- Ira Glass

Ira Glass is the presenter, creator and executive producer of This American Life. He’s one of the most recognizable figures in American radio. The program reaches 1.8 million listeners each week, and around 700,00 people download the weekly podcast, making it the most downloaded podcast in the world. It has won just about every award for broadcast journalism in the U.S.

This American Life (TAL) is a radio documentary show that never calls itself that, for the same reason Radiolab never calls itself a ‘Science’ show: too often, listeners associate such descriptions with worthy, excessively formal and earnest public radio programs from the past.

Format
The format of TAL is straightforward; Ira reminds his listeners that, “Each week we bring you a theme, and different kinds of stories around that theme”. These stories might arise from simple first person narrative, from an interview, or a documentary story. TAL will also occasionally bring a story told to a live audience, in the style of The Moth. Sometimes the format will also include fiction, read by authors such as David Sedaris and David Rakoff.

Each show begins without ceremony. There is no music, no formal introduction, no ‘welcome to the program’. Ira simply begins to talk. In the mind of the listener it’s as though he’s appeared across the kitchen table from you and begun to spin a great story. The effect is friendly and intimate.

He begins relating a story that he’s confident will hook the listener, which encapsulates or introduces the show’s theme. Ira completes the story, then outlines what’s ahead as a series of ‘Acts’.

The themes are wildly diverse. Here are a few examples from recent shows:

166: NOBODY’S FAMILY IS GOING TO CHANGE
Three stories that consider the question: Does anyone’s family ever change?

412: MILLION DOLLAR IDEA
Back in the 1980s Michael Larson made the most money ever on the game show Press Your Luck. And it was no accident—Larson had a plan to get rich that surprised everyone: the home viewers, the show’s producers and mostly Larson himself.

450: SO CRAZY IT JUST MIGHT WORK
A few years ago a cancer researcher named Jonathan Brody gave a speech at his alma mater saying that people in his field really needed to think outside the box to find a cure. Afterward he was approached by his old orchestra teacher, who had something way out of the box—a theory that he could kill cancer cells with electromagnetic waves.

14 From conversation with Ira Glass at This American Life studios.
Each story within the hour typically carries a different emotional tone and combined, they create an hour of great richness and depth, presenting different slices of life, and radically different points of view. There’s humour and poignancy and surprises. It’s radio for the heart and head; a trick that TAL pulls off successfully week after week.

The two basic building blocks
In New York I recorded an interview with Ira Glass (since broadcast on Conversations) at the studios of This American Life, and I asked him if he had a kind of checklist for a successful story. He said, “There’s not a checklist but we do have tests: It has to be surprising, which eliminates a lot of stories... And then they have to drive towards some thought about the world that you don’t feel like you’ve heard before. A radio story really has to attach itself to an idea to properly engage you... a real thought you come to at the end.”

Ira outlined it another way to a group of media students:

In broadcasting you have two basic building blocks. They’re very powerful.

One is the anecdote... The power of the anecdote is so great. It has a momentum of itself. It enlivens even the most boring facts. When you have one thing leading to the next, leading to next, you feel like you’re on a train or destination and it’s going to find something. The other thing that an anecdote should do is to be constantly raising questions. From the beginning of the story, you’re throwing out questions to keep people listening, and answering them along the way.

The other big building block is a moment of reflection. At some point somebody’s got to say here’s why you’re listening to this story. Here’s the bigger something that you’re driving at.

Often you’ll have an anecdote and it’s so interesting, but it doesn’t tell you anything. The other problem is when you have some boring facts but you do have something interesting to say about it. In a good story you’re going to need both... The two interwoven will make something that’s larger than the sum of its parts.

An example he sometimes cites is a story from some years ago. It’s a classic TAL story that neatly follows the anecdote/reflection structure.

A reporter called Brett is on a subway platform and sees in the distance a man walking up close to each person on the platform, and then he says something. Then he moves on to the next person and says something. The man is nicely dressed, doesn’t appear to be asking for money. And as he gets closer, Brett can hear what he’s saying...

“At this point”, Ira says, “no one is turning off the radio”. Why? It’s a banal sequence, but there’s a mystery and the listener has to know what this strange man is saying.

What’s he’s saying is: ‘You: you can stay... You gotta go... You can stay... You’re outta here’. And as he gets close, Brett is worried if he’ll make the cut. Then the guy walks up to Brett, gets a little too close and says... ‘You can stay’. And Brett feels euphoria. Even though in his mind he knew there was no reason for it.

Then the anecdote is followed by the reflection:

There is just something about the judgement of strangers... When the clerk in the record store looks at the CDs you’re buying and gives you a glance like ‘You are so lame’. It’s as if by their status as strangers, they have some special insight into who we are.
Changing the tone of the Conversation

Ira Glass believes that one of the key reasons these public radio programs appear so vibrant is their use of natural language; they stand in contrast to the stodgy, pompous tone that has alienated too many potential listeners from American public radio in the past. He describes this stilted mode of speech as ‘news-speak’, and it’s why he believes conventional news is losing audience.

*Somehow fact-based journalism is stuck in an aesthetics that’s left over from the days of printed newspapers and in broadcast, really left over from the days of newsreels. There’s still a kind of deep-voiced, air-of-authority tone lingering in the back of a newscaster’s presentation.*

In a presentation to students, Ira argued that, whereas most news organizations make the world seem ‘stupider, smaller and less interesting’, *This American Life* focuses on the surprise, amusement, humor and pleasure in the world, rather than going for the “fake gravitas that... most other news organizations adopt, in the hopes of being taken seriously.”

Ira happily admits that he once attempted to wear this mask of ‘fake gravitas’. He gave me audio from a story he made years ago for NPR’s *All Things Considered*, which embarrasses him today:

(Audio of supermarket noises)

IRA GLASS: “It’s not such a long way from the local grocery store to the international debate over whether sorghum and meat production are causing corn to decline in Latin America. There’s a general air of prosperity here partly thanks to Mexican imports of US grains which help boost our farm economy...”

Et cetera, et cetera. Even today, Ira says he’s not sure what this story was about. It’s what comes from trying to impersonate a radio personality, instead of talking naturally.

He’s learned his lesson. *This American Life* employs a casual, conversational style of speech, which drops all pretense of omniscience. The approach is more honest, more authentic and the product is ultimately more engaging for the listener.

**Interviewing people**

Ira Glass likes to quote Keith Talbot, a producer that both he and Jay Allison cite as a mentor. ‘Doing an interview is like hosting a party: it’s your party and your guest will follow your lead as to how to act. If you’re nervous, they’ll be nervous’.

Using a casual, conversational approach, the interviewer is able to more easily coax wonderful stories from people who’ve never been near a radio microphone before.

I asked Ira if he had any special techniques for getting shy people to open up. He laughed and said that just bringing a genuine interest to a guest was often enough to do the trick.

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15 [http://www.current.org/audience/aud1017npr-opportunities.shtml](http://www.current.org/audience/aud1017npr-opportunities.shtml)

16 From conversation with Ira Glass at *This American Life* studios.

Mainly we’re just curious. I feel that the power of someone’s curiosity about you is a really magnetic force. If you think about how many times in your day that someone actually cares about what you have to say... I mean, I work with people that I love and I’m married to someone I adore, but the number of minutes where somebody wants to hear me talk about my feelings about any subject is, I think, between three and seven! So the notion that someone might be interested in you and want to ask you questions for an hour, that’s an incredibly powerful human force.¹⁸

‘Hearing’ the listening
While talking with Ira, I recalled Jay Allison’s comment that the audience can ‘hear’ when the interviewer is really listening. Ira agreed, and I asked him what he thought the listeners were hearing. He paused for a good long while and said, ‘I think they’re hearing the drama happening between the two people in the interview. In a good interview you’ll hear that the interviewer is drawn into the emotion of it’.

One of the lovely paradoxes of radio is that silence can hold so much information. Silence is sometimes called ‘dead air’ on radio, and is normally regarded with terror, as a kind of death. When the constant burble of radio is suddenly halted, the effect is like turning off a tap.

Occasionally in an interview, a guest will become choked with emotion and struggle to reach for an answer and a moment of tense silence will hang in the air. At such times, a presenter will often feel a need to chatter and quickly extinguish the ‘dead air’. Even though I’ve felt the gravitational pull of this urge to talk, I try to wait and let the guest fill the silence instead. I find it’s always better for the guest, and the listener too.

This American Life and Radiolab often sustain stretches of silence that last as long as four or five seconds - an eternity in radio terms. The effect, when it’s used authentically, can be electrifying. Ira said that silence was one of This American Life’s most powerful tools:

*I think silence is so beautiful on the radio... We do all sorts of things to manipulate the silence into being even more silent. Like, if somebody’s going to make a big point in a story, usually what we’ll do is have music going on underneath all the stuff before, and then when they come to the big point, we pull out all the music so the silence is even more pronounced.*¹⁹

Kill the story
*In writing you must kill all your darlings.*
- William Faulkner

Listeners to This American Life are often struck by how well it sustains across the hour: how one great story follows another. This is because TAL is happy to kill stories that just aren’t working, even at an advanced stage of production.

Ira told me, ‘For us to find three or four stories that we like we run at 15 to 20 stories. We go into production on seven or eight. We do interviews and fly people around. We commission stories from famous authors. And then we kill half of them’.

This is how each episode sustains at such a powerful pitch. It requires producers to undertake the unpleasant task of calling people and letting them know the program won’t be going with their story.

¹⁸ From conversation with Ira Glass at This American Life studios.

¹⁹ Ibid.
Innovation
Ira Glass and his producers are always trying to keep their listeners guessing. The TAL template of ‘different kinds of stories around a theme’, gives them a surprising amount of latitude. More often than not an episode will contain two to four ‘acts’, which vary in tone and content, but sometimes they’ll give a whole episode to a single story.

One episode will be a sustained insight into the collapse of a Californian car factory; another will be a series of amusing and moving anecdotes about babysitting. Another will follow a group of hardened prison inmates rehearsing and performing a production of Hamlet.

The upshot is that it’s rare for TAL listeners and podcasters to select or avoid certain episodes on the basis of whether they’re pre-disposed to enjoy the theme. They trust Ira to make any subject matter interesting, surprising and funny.

Long time listeners of This American Life can’t fail to note how ambitious the program is creatively, how it’s always finding ways to do something different, to press against the predictability of its format and surprise its listeners. Ira seems to always be looking for off-the-wall show ideas and you can hear his evident pleasure in presenting them. Creative restlessness is a hallmark of this kind of radio, and it appears to be the key to sustaining the energy of the production team and the audience.

The whole is more than the sum of its parts
Perhaps the most acclaimed and popular episode of This American Life so far is a special, single story episode from 2008 titled The Giant Pool of Money20.

This show sought to do nothing less than explain America’s subprime mortgage disaster. It did this by following a chain of human stories from the bottom of the housing market to the top. Media academic Jay Rosen hails it as ‘probably the best work of explanatory journalism I have ever heard...

Going in to the program, I didn’t understand the mortgage mess one bit... Coming out of the program, I understood the complete scam: what happened, why it happened, and why I should care. I had a good sense of the motivations and situations of players all down the line. Civic mastery was mine over a complex story, dense with technical terms, unfolding on many fronts and different levels, with no heroes21.

Rosen notes that This American Life inverts the usual hierarchy of how we come to understand a story. Conventionally, we pick up bits of news on a subject and over time this leads us to maybe tune in to some analysis and from that a larger holistic explanation of the situation will take shape. But this approach fails us when it comes to something like the mortgage crisis, where until the whole story is understood, it’s impossible to understand any one part.

This American Life succeeds here because it genuinely wants to find out the whole of what happened, and to bring its listeners along for the journey.

I remember when the show began, I’d get this comment all the time: ‘I really can’t wash the dishes when I listen to you guys.’

- Jad Abumrad

Radiolab is a public radio show that now rivals This American Life in popularity and acclaim. Ira Glass is almost as enthusiastic about it as he is for his own program. Like TAL it’s an hour-long show and each episode is usually a collection of stories around a theme, and Radiolab goes for the largest, philosophical themes they can think of: ‘Memory and Forgetting’, ‘After Life’, ‘Words’, ‘Limits’, ‘Falling’. Jad and Robert go for the biggest, mind-bending subjects and their listeners are happy to go there with them.

As mentioned previously, Radiolab has the good sense never to describe itself as a ‘Science’ show, and thereby avoids wearing the associations that too many Americans make with science on public radio (earnest, confusing, boring, unemotional). Radiolab is full of wonder and weirdness.

Episodes on their website are tagged under four categories of biological response: ‘Gut-wrenching’, ‘Heart-swelling’, ‘Knee-slapping’ and ‘Mind-bending’. Like This American Life, it often passes what is commonly known in radio as the Driveway Test: listeners find themselves parked in the driveway of their homes, lingering, unable to exit the car and go inside until the story is concluded and the episode is finished.

While in production, the Radiolab team develop a cluster of episodes concurrently. They come up with a set of themes, then the teams researches stories that will start to cohere around the themes and after a while they get a sense of whether there’s enough to sustain an hour-long episode. Like The American Life, standards are very high, and they kill at least as many stories as they keep.

Radiolab is a finely crafted show and the production is painstaking and time-consuming. It doesn’t appear as regularly as This American Life. To keep listeners coming back regularly, they produce a series of Radiolab ‘Shorts’ and release them every few weeks solely as a podcast.

Jad and Robert

The two hosts are Jad Abumrad and Robert Krulwich. Neither men are scientists, or even science journalists. Jad comes from a music background and has a gift for mixing voice, noise, space and music into rich, soundscapes that hold the listener entranced while the larger ideas of the program sink in. Robert Krulwich is an experienced broadcaster who has reported on a number of programs for NPR and commercial media.

Jad and Robert often introduce each story to each other; while one enthuses, the other acts as a stand in for the impatient listener and goads the other to make his case and get to the point. They kid and mock each other like old buddies. Despite the difference in age and background, they sound like good friends having a great time.

I visited Radiolab’s production offices at WNYC in lower Manhattan, watched Jad Abumrad record an interview and enjoyed a conversation with Robert Krulwich. Krulwich, now in his sixties, is truly delighted to have found a large new audience with so many twenty-somethings in it.

Within the Radiolab office it's obvious their relationship is the same off-mic as it is on air. Robert said he still marvels at the 'lovely accident that such various creative spirits could collide to produce Radiolab'. In his long broadcasting career, he said it was one of those rare collaborations where 'one plus one equals five'.

**Discovery in storytelling**
Robert stressed how important the element of discovery is to Radiolab. He said that most of the time he and Jad go into a program not knowing much about the central questions of the episode at all. The joy of discovery is authentic and the listener can hear it in their voices.

In an interview with The New York Review of Books, he said, 'We knew we could make the material interesting to each other, and that if we did it in duet form and showed our affection to each other, it would be kind of a warm place.'

Radio transmits curiosity more powerfully than any other medium. A program can easily infect listeners with the giddiness of discovery. Jad and Robert are so genuinely enthused by their stories it's difficult to listen and remain unmoved. As is the case with Jay Allison and Ira Glass, Robert believes the audience can hear when the hosts are really listening (interestingly, both he and Jay both offered that thought independently to me without any prompting).

As production begins, they like to begin with a question and if they're amazed by the answer, then that answer is likely to find its way into a show: Can a sugared pill convince a patient to get better? (yes); what are babies thinking? (quite a lot, as it turns out); can someone be in a coma and yet fully conscious? (yes); what 'makes' time? (the second law of thermodynamics).

Just like This American Life, Jad and Robert win over listeners with their natural, breezy language. They broadcast the same way they talk and they react just as any normal person would, when hearing, for example, a scientist describe a parasite that invades the mouth of a fish, consumes its tongue and then becomes the tongue.

The human element is always present in a Radiolab story. One episode from 2009 is titled ‘Stochasticity’, stories of coincidence and probability. It begins with an anecdote about a girl in England called Laura Buxton. Laura sends off a balloon with her name on it into the air. It travels all the way across England and is eventually claimed by another young girl called Laura Buxton.

Here's how the story was 'scripted' on paper, with a mix of fixed and loose elements:

THE LAURAS

[SHOW ID]
JA: I heard this story from a girl named... Laura.
L1: Hi..
JA: Hello Laura!
L1: Hello! I’m Laura Buxton
JA: ha ha. Im SO excited to talk to you! L1: cool.

And Laura Buxton was just ten years old when this story begins.
JA: Let’s do it like a movie, if you don’t mind. L1: like a movie...
JA: yeah.
L1: OK

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23 Ibid.
JA: So you’re ten years old, L1: Well, almost ten
JA: Almost 10
L1: Yeah

JA: Your family is having a party, right?
L1: Yes, it was my nanna and grand dad’s 50th anniversary.

[big party...150 ppl...cake, balloons]
After the party, Laura’s grandpa came over to Laura with an idea.
L1: He um had a balloon left over from the party and he just thought it would be fun to write my name on it and see what happened if I let it go.

JA: And what was written on the balloon?
L1: “Please return to Laura Buxton.” And then on the other side it had my address.

So they go outside, and
L1: I just let it go and the wind took it.

MUSIC

L1: we were laughing and joking because we thought it would just get stuck in a tree a bit further down the road somewhere.

[NEED SIGN POST]
JA: And you’re living in a town called L1: um, I’m living in Stoke-on-Trent

JAD: Now, I’m looking at a map here... Stoke-on Trent is north is up towards the top of England... I’m looking here

... and it would have had to float up. Stratford, kept going past Wasale, Birmingham, past Kitter minster...

JA: And somehow it lands well, where?

L2: Yeah, I got the balloon and I kind of live near Stonehenge, like, in the west.

[back ID Laura 2]
L2: The balloon got stuck in our hedge but our next-door neighbor found it in the hedge and he thought that it was just a bit of rubbish. and he was about to put it in the bin, literally, like have his hand over the bin and then he saw the label saying

L1: “Please return to Laura Buxton, L2: and he was like... O MY GOD.

[RK is confused, why?
JA explains. end with “a ten year old girl named laura buxton lets go of a balloon, the balloon travels 140 miles and lands in the yard of a ten year old girl named laura buxton]
It’s pretty weird.

The episode on coincidence and probability is full of strange stories like this, but the strangeness turns out to be a trick of human perception.

Listeners feel like they’re discovering this amazing story at the same time as Jad and Robert. The script carefully plots out the existing bits of audio from the two Lauras but leaves Jad’s linking explanations unscripted, so the on-air product sounds as natural and conversational as possible.

Ira Glass says of the above exchange, “The back and forth between Jad and Robert... is casual. Open to digression and disagreement and most of all: enthusiasm. All of this is what feels so original. You feel Jad’s excitement over how amazing this story is. There’s a sense of playfulness and discovery to the whole project.”

There’s another subtle message in this style of broadcasting. Robert and Jad are reminding the listener that when such large, intimidating subjects arise, you’re allowed to be curious and and ask the scientist to speak in layman’s terms.

Robert Krulwich told me this approach isn’t without its critics. Many long time NPR listeners who expect their public radio to sound formal and ‘serious’ are appalled by the banter. Krulwich said that he sees (and sometimes replies) to their angry letters, but for every one such listener he loses, he’s happy to welcome another five new listeners through the door.

**Jad’s New Aesthetic**

> I marvel at Radiolab when I hear it. I feel jealous. Its co-creators Jad Abumrad and Robert Krulwich have digested all the storytelling and production tricks of everyone in public radio before them, invented some slick moves of their own, and ended up creating the rarest thing you can create in any medium: a new aesthetic.

- Ira Glass

It’s easy to misuse music in a radio story. Radio producers are often tempted to strengthen weak stories by setting it to emotional music. Ira Glass uses music very sparingly in *This American Life*: to turn a page, or hold a thought, rather than to underline an emotional moment. He says, ‘When you get into a super-emotional scene you can’t use emotional music because you take something that’s real and make it seem really cheesy’. Ira maintains that, ‘Generally the kind of music we use is more emotionally neutral. Its goal is more to keep a sense of motion, to keep things moving. And to underline the turns in feelings’.

Jad Abumrad’s approach to *Radiolab* is different. The music is layered, but subtle, and the effect is emotionally warm. Robert Krulwich says, ‘Jad uses a layered jazzlike metric, creating breadths and spaces of sound that are new. Not new to Tchaikovsky or John Cage, but new to radio’.

Unlike *This American Life*, *Radiolab* has an opening theme or “sting”: a stunning 20 second long splash of sound that often starts the show. Several voices tell you straightforwardly, ‘You’re listening to *Radiolab*... from WNYC... and NPR’. Underneath these voices is an efflorescence of digital noise, voices warming up, gibberish and static. It’s a characteristic mixture of richly complex audio with simple, friendly voices, and it represents the aesthetic of the program in miniature.

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25 From conversation with Ira Glass at *This American Life* studios.

26 McKibben, op. cit.
theme is like the striking of a triangle in a cavernous space, and it signals to the listener: slow
down and listen.

A Radiolab story will often end with a stretch of minimalist music composed by Jad, to allow time
for the listener to absorb the information and emotional power of the story. The music is lovely and
distant; it sustains the mood but doesn’t draw attention to itself. The rule for music in Radiolab
appears to be: keep it subtle, beautiful and rare.

Many techniques of the new public radio can be easily adopted by other broadcasters: the natural
language, the focus on everyday voices. Radiolab’s style of layered sound isn’t so easily
replicated. Nor should it be. It’s an innovation more akin to music composition than to the
rudimentary craft skills of journalism and interviewing. But Jad’s new aesthetic has opened many
ears to the possibilities inherent in radio, which mixes storytelling with sound and music.

One can only be hopeful that the new practitioners of public radio, attracted to the medium by
Radiolab, will find their own new aesthetics.
Part of my Fellowship was also spent in London, visiting the production offices of two BBC Radio programs. These programs have arisen from the BBC’s cultural traditions which are distinctly different from American public radio: a comparatively recent phenomenon. BBC Radio is bigger, older and has evolved with its own tone, style and formats.

BBC Radio 4 broadcasts a wide range of spoken-word programs, including news, drama, comedy, science and history. As such it closely resembles ABC Radio National in Australia.

The new forms of American public radio don’t appear to have widely caught on in Radio 4; it’s still largely wedded to conventional formats and a cool, slightly formalized language, which holds presenters at a careful distance from their listeners.

The two Radio 4 programs I visited in the UK are happy exceptions. While The Infinite Monkey Cage and Thinking Allowed both draw on longstanding BBC radio traditions, they’re imbued with a similar spirit to the new public radio programs from the US. There is no ‘fake gravitas’; instead there is curiosity, humour and energy.

Thinking Allowed is a Radio 4 sociology program that (again) wisely avoids advertising itself as such. It’s better described as a program that looks at the way society works and how we live today.

It’s most often broadcast as a live-to-air program on BBC Radio 4, but some episodes are documentaries recorded in the field. The half hour format is typically broken down into three acts: two stories with a correspondence segment in the middle. Like Ira Glass, host Laurie Taylor will often begin his first segment with a personal anecdote which illustrates the larger theme he’s introducing. As with This American Life, the listener is engaged intimately and immediately.

Laurie Taylor

Laurie Taylor is a great broadcaster; knowledgeable, curious, compassionate and charming. Laurie is an accomplished sociologist and criminologist. He was a prominent campus radical figure in the early seventies (author Malcolm Bradbury actually based the lead character in The History Man on Laurie).

Laurie really does enjoy bringing provocative ideas to his listeners. He sometimes finds (as I do) that some of his listeners want him to upbraid his guests when they make a seemingly outrageous pronouncement; he trusts his listeners to make up their own minds. As with Radiolab, Laurie Taylor’s curiosity is infectious and beguiling.

I observed a live to air broadcast from Broadcasting House in London. The episode had two stories sourced from new sociological studies; the first on suicide, the second on family secrets. Both were enlivened by true stories that informed the research.

Interviewing

Thinking Allowed is like The Moth insofar as it is confident that powerful stories can be gleaned from ordinary people as well as experts.

When interviewing everyday people, Laurie employs the subtle interview skills of the social scientist who wants to elicit truthful responses by asking short, open questions. His approach with ordinary people is to take them as he finds them, to ask them questions in such a way that they feel confident enough to answer in a forthright manner. It’s the very opposite to the interrogative, prosecutorial style of many BBC interviewers; Laurie coaxes his answers instead and it yields rich results.
At the time of my visit, Thinking Allowed had just completed a quietly powerful three-part series called ‘Home Life’; each episode recorded in three different British homes, to investigate the different ways people and families live together. You can hear Laurie’s gentle interview style putting the people at ease; they feel relaxed enough to speak truthfully.

Like the best of the new American public radio programs, Thinking Allowed draws its listeners in close, brings the voices of everyday people to the air and it sounds like it’s genuinely curious about the world.

THE INFINITE MONKEY CAGE
BBC Radio 4
Bush House London.
http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00snr0w

In London I also visited The Infinite Monkey Cage, a program that brings the great BBC tradition of live comedic panel shows into the sanctum of science broadcasting.

The two co-hosts are physicist Professor Brian Cox and comedian Robin Ince. They’re joined each episode by a panel of scientists, writers and comedians. The program is recorded in front of a raucous live audience. The show is informative, entertaining and provocative; it commands a large enthusiastic following in Britain and tickets to live recordings sell out quickly.

Like Radiolab, the hosts are keen to explore the more far-out edges of science: cosmology, space travel, the end of the world and the limits of knowledge itself.

The tone of The Infinite Monkey Cage is one of gregarious skepticism. It was conceived as a spiky defense of reason against mysticism, new-ageism and spoon-bending. The hosts exhort their audience to ‘think rationally’, despite their evident love of humour and silliness.

The outer limits of science are full of paradox and strangeness and as such are fertile grounds for comedy. Brian Cox is a very prominent physicist and a famous science communicator, but it’s Robin’s contribution that moves the program beyond conventional BBC Radio 4 fare and into the new, more compelling style of public radio.

Robin’s presence is crucial; as a listener you feel that Robin is there to hold the experts to account and make them explain themselves and their ideas. He keeps the discussion in touch with the natural human response to the big, outlandish ideas that are being put by the panelists.

http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01460f3
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

If so much of the new public radio comes from America, it's perhaps because America needs it.

America is much more diverse and divided place than Australia. The United States can be characterised as a collection of disparate communities that share a language but not much else in common. The rise of partisan media, 24-hour news networks and commercial talkback radio have fed from this division and can arguably take some responsibility for the ideological stalemate that infect its governing institutions.

I realised in the course of my fellowship, that in the midst all this rancour, the new public radio has struck upon a great counterforce, a longing for connection, for shared sympathies, for a genuine dialogue outside America’s never ending culture wars. The new public radio does this by:

1. Bringing entertaining, absorbing, engrossing true stories to its listeners.
2. Being alive to wonder, humour and paradox.
3. Generating energy from the authentic curiosity of the program makers.

Australia doesn’t suffer from anything like the divisions present in American society, which arise from longstanding historical circumstances. That hasn’t stopped some elements in our commercial media from attempting to goad groups of Australians against each other. Of course commercial talk radio, like any other news medium, should encourage lively debate between different points of view; that is indeed its primary editorial role. But it seems easily drawn into cheap demagoguery; the desire to attract listeners through a belligerent affirmation of one world view against another; indeed one suspects that is its bread and butter. But who knows: commercial talk radio might discover one day that it can deliver value to shareholders by engaging with this desire for connection as much as conflict.

ABC Local Radio long ago absorbed many of the ‘secrets’ of the new American public radio. Each station, whether metropolitan or regional, operates from an ethos of close contact with its local community and local voices are heard all the time on the air. ABC Local Radio also strongly encourages its presenters to use natural speech, and to abandon the mask of omniscience. This goes some way to explaining why ABC Local Radio draws such large, fiercely loyal audiences. But Local Radio can always do more to bring citizens’ voices to the air, beyond the conventional talkback complaint forums.

Some of the most valuable findings of my fellowship are the new and innovative techniques that American public radio locates local stories and brings them to light: Jay Allison’s Sonic IDs and his Lost and Found Sound program being a couple of good examples.

I’d like to see ABC Radio connect our program makers with some of these innovative public radio figures from the United States. Ira Glass is due to visit Australia in early 2012 and I understand that ABC Radio has invited him to speak to program makers. ABC Radio should consider inviting Jay Allison to Australia to make a similar presentation to presenters and producers. Jay’s ethos of community engagement is a natural fit for ABC Local Radio.

ABC Radio might also want to consider offering a fellowship of its own for up-and-coming program makers to attend future Transom Story Workshops.

28 [http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/s1574155.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/s1574155.htm)
These are all ideas that may be taken up in a broader sense, but in the mean time, I plan to use the insights from my Fellowship to develop my own Conversations program and take it into new areas.

Firstly, we plan to bring to air more ‘unfamous’ guests, people with powerful stories who are unknown to the broader community. We do this to some degree already but we’d like to do it more often, ‘to help citizens speak for themselves, to one another directly’, as Jay Allison says. We’d like the Conversations website to be even more of a repository of Australian oral history than it is today.

During the Fellowship, I collated several ideas on how we might source these guests more effectively.

**Voicemail**
Taking leaf from Jay Allison’s *Lost and Found Sound*, I propose to set up a Conversations voicemail account to record listener stories, which may find their way into the program. Jay Allison told me he was delighted with the effectiveness of this simple tool, and that often the phone message itself would become a part of the story.

**Themed Episodes**
I also propose to use this voicemail account to produce more theme-based episodes of Conversations. In 2011 we produced three such shows (*Near Death Experiences*[^29], *The Long Walk*[^30], *Lost in Space*[^31]), collating stories from various guests on previous Conversations interviews around these themes.

A voicemail account would allow me to invite listeners to call in with stories around a proposed theme. Such programs will open up the range of potential voices on the program: guests won’t need to sustain an entire hour, they’ll just need one good story to tell.

**House Calls**
Digital recording technology is becoming smaller, cheaper, better sounding and less obtrusive. Taking the program to the home of the interviewee is likely to be a less daunting experience for a subject with little or no media experience. This year we plan to record more Conversations outside of ABC studios, going into people’s homes where appropriate.

**Live Events**
Visiting *The Infinite Monkey Cage* has given me the desire to hold more Conversations events with live audiences. Every year we produce several shows live from venues at the Sydney Writers Festival and the Brisbane Writers Festival. In 2011 we also held a citizens’ forum in Hobart called *Living on an Island* about life in Tasmania.

In 2012 we plan to do more of these around Australia and include Moth style citizen storytelling elements into the program.

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Jay Allison and Ira Glass were particularly insightful and generous. I admire both these men enormously and will always be mindful of the high standards they set for themselves and their programs.

I'm also very thankful to Pam O'Brien, Senior Producer of Conversations, who gave up a chunk of her long service leave to join me for part of the fellowship in New York and Cape Cod. Pam is very much the other half of Conversations and I'm so glad she was there to participate and contribute.

I'm deeply grateful to the Winston Churchill Trust for giving me the opportunity to meet the people behind these shows, to see how they work, and to draw out their thoughts, ideas and stories. The fellowship experience has changed the way I broadcast.