

How podcasts are being used by journalists and how they are changing journalism

By JANET SAIDI
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The Kitchen Sisters (Davia Nelson & Nikki Silva) are Peabody Award winning independent producers who create stories for NPR and other public media. (Laura Folger)

As journalism in America struggles with withering cuts, decreased attention spans and wavering trust of media, podcasts are finding new audiences with their mix of news, commentary and personal stories.

Culture-vultures are devouring them in record numbers. But can this increasingly popular form truly be defined as journalism?

Veteran podcaster Nikki Silva, half of the longtime production team the Kitchen Sisters, says without hesitation that she and partner Davia Nelson are essentially public radio journalists.

“So many people are attracted to the podcasts that have grown out of public radio,” says Silva. “We hold ourselves to those same standards. ... We’re not hard-news journalists. But I think our stories really hit on news that a lot of people won’t listen to on topics

such as homelessness or hunger.”

Silva offers as an example a story they did for the podcast series “Hidden Kitchens” about how the George Foreman grill has become the stove of choice for many homeless people.

“This kind of story is a side way into a difficult issue,” she says. “We talked to George Foreman, and he just went, ‘Wow, I didn’t know that.’ And then he launched into his own story of hunger as a child.”

Ira Glass and his team at “This American Life” have been mixing hard-edged journalism with intensely personal stories since the 1990s. Glass and podcasters such as Roman Mars and the producers of “Invisibilia” have always talked this way: putting complicated topics into intimate, personal narratives that reveal something about American life. Three years ago, “This American Life” spinoff “Serial” garnered more listeners during its run than any podcast in history.

Podcasters vary on how they see their journalistic role.

“I consider myself more of a storyteller who knows how to commit acts of journalism,” says Tim Lloyd, who with Kameel Stanley produces the St. Louis Public Radio podcast “We Live Here.”

The podcast came about after the protests in nearby Ferguson, Mo., in wake of the police shooting of Michael Brown. Both Stanley and Lloyd say they draw from journalism training to produce their podcast, which explores complicated issues of race and class through the stories of local residents. (Full disclosure: Lloyd is a former student of mine at the Missouri School of Journalism in Columbia.) Lloyd says he identifies himself more as an audio storyteller than a journalist.

For Al Letson, a longtime public radio producer and the host of the Center for Investigative Reporting’s podcast “Reveal,” the trajectory has gone in the opposite direction. Letson is a playwright and former poetry slam champion who came to public radio as an artist and feels he is now emerging as a journalist.

“When I first started in public radio, I didn’t see myself as a journalist,” he says by phone from the Bay Area-based center. “But working at ‘Reveal’ and being around journalists, I can proudly say that I think of myself as a journalist.”

Even as they draw from journalism standards and training, podcasters seem to embrace the idea that their tone, style and motivations go beyond traditional techniques, defining their craft in nonjournalistic terms such as intimacy and connection. And even in the case of Letson, poetry.

On an oppressively hot Friday afternoon in St. Louis, Stanley and Lloyd are in a small studio preparing for what will be an intense two-hour interview with three members of the J.D. Shelley family, members of whom were part of a landmark 1948 U.S. Supreme Court ruling on housing discrimination and restrictive covenants.

Like many people who work together, Stanley and Lloyd complete each other's sentences and communicate with meaningful glances throughout the intense taping. Lloyd admits that jumping into the podcast immediately after the events in Ferguson, and the experience of covering race and class in the years since, has been exhausting. And Stanley, who was the only black reporter in the newsroom when she was hired, says the pair together have experienced growing pains with the show.

While engineers set up their interview, Lloyd and Stanley contemplate the question of whether, in an era where citizen trust in media falls along partisan lines, the intimacy and compelling stories brought by podcasters can reinvigorate the journalism landscape, perhaps even bridge divides. Both are skeptical.

Talking with Lloyd, it's clear he is beginning to see his work as distanced from traditional journalism. In fact, the "We Live Here" podcast was moved from the newsroom to the station's programming department, a relocation Lloyd and Stanley are comfortable with. Both say it has allowed them to be freer and more experimental in their storytelling.

They also see their storytelling going beyond headlines, the usual shorthand categories of race and politics, and getting at the deeper meanings. As with other podcasters, they chat with listeners at community events, including the occasional happy hour; Stanley says was taken aback to learn that at least one listener sees the show as "self-care." "I don't know exactly how to put my finger on it," Lloyd says, "but I think there is something very special that Kameel and I are seeing firsthand, that resonates with people in a profoundly meaningful way."

The mention of "meaning" causes Stanley to sit up in her chair and reflect: "If you're not doing something that's meaningful for people, what are you doing?"

“Attempting to make money!” Lloyd volunteers, with a little sarcasm. He later adds that the “We Live Here” stories tend to begin when “we’ll get curious about something and start digging.”

“It sounds a lot like journalism,” he agrees, when it’s pointed out. Stanley adds, “The sourcing muscle has not stopped working.”

Some indicators suggest that journalists are increasingly considering their work in terms of context and narrative — exactly the kind of reporting produced through podcasts. Nichole Dahmen, an associate professor at the University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication, is one of three researchers who conducted a 2016 study published in the academic journal *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism* gauging the attitudes of 1,300 journalists on “contextual” reporting.

For the last 50 years, Dahmen says, “We’ve seen this interest in stories that goes beyond breaking news. Reporting stories that help us get more in depth, more perspective.” Dahmen says that according to the 2016 study, journalists still say “accurately portraying the world” is their first goal. But she says among participants in her recent research, particularly younger and female journalists, there is a motivation to get beyond the facts. When Dahmen talks about her research in contextual reporting, she sounds surprisingly like a podcaster, using words like voice, community, character.

“This is not just reporting on the problem and then shining the spotlight on something else,” she says, and points to efforts like the Solutions Journalism Network, a website that connects journalists and trains them to do in-depth reporting. “One of the beautiful things about radio and podcasting is you have the opportunity to hear the characters, the people who are in the community. ... The people involved in the story speak in their own voice.”

“We take you into an experience and make you meet people that you might not meet in your daily life,” says Kitchen Sister Silva, who launches a new NPR series, “The Keepers,” next month. right “We want to make you laugh, make you cry, make you understand and go deeper.”

Although traditional reporting emphasizes the facts and lets readers draw their own conclusions, podcasters like Letson, Silva, Lloyd and Stanley are not shy about trying to change people’s minds.

“We have some pretty old-school journalists at ‘Reveal,’ and they may bristle at the idea of journalism being activist, but I don’t,” says Letson. “We are out there to make the world a better place, to make it more just. It’s important — in this media landscape that we’re in right now — that we find ways to reach people.”

Janet Saidi is a public-radio producer and teacher at the Missouri School of Journalism.