

RadioDoc Review

Volume 10 • Issue 2 • 2025

Viva the Narrative Podcast – the Case Against Video

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Abstract

A decade ago, presentations about podcasting still had to start by defining a podcast. Was it a medium or a genre? Time-shifted radio or new audio format? The one thing people understood was that it was audio-based. Soon there were talk podcasts, narrative podcasts and hybrid versions from narrative news to dramatised chat. Scholars and makers alike articulated podcasting's emerging currency: intimacy, authenticity, nicheness, lack of regulation, accessibility, portability (Berry 2016, Lindgren 2016, McHugh 2016). Apple dominated smartphone delivery until Spotify changed the paradigm (Sullivan 2019) and YouTube overtook both as a favoured platform. The 'pivot to video' took hold, with celebrity talk podcasts screen-based and described as 'shows', or even a new form of television. These shows sought to usurp the by now signature characteristics of podcasting – intimacy, reflexivity, democracy (Dowling 2025) – in pursuit of profit and influence. But one form of podcasting remains immune to the lure of the screen. Narrative podcasts deploy crafted sounds, voice and music to compose a sonic story whose only images are those triggered in the listener's mind by the potent partnership audio foment between memory and imagination (Street 2014). When assembled with artistry and sensitivity, these audio stories can generate empathy, insight and emotion, reverberations that endure long beyond the prescriptive video 'podcast'. This presentation, first given at the MeCCSA Radio and Audio Studies symposium pays tribute to the narrative podcast as a vibrant audio art/journalism form, destined to survive and even benefit from the video podcast turn.

Keywords

video podcast, narrative podcast, serial

Recommended Citation

McHugh, S. A., (2026) "Viva the Narrative Podcast – the Case Against Video", *RadioDoc Review* 10(2). doi: <https://doi.org/10.14453/rdr.1820>

I want to start with a scene from about ten years ago.

We were in Barcelona, at a glitzy media summit called the Global Editors Network. Compared to academic conferences, this was hi-tech and shamelessly show-offy, from the cocktails and canapes at a castle straight out of *Game of Thrones*, to the expo hall filled with tech types flaunting their latest must-have gadgets and apps.

Cut to a panel about to address an audience that includes editors from the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *El Pais*, *Le Monde*, *Financial Times*, *The Guardian*, as well as executives from BuzzFeed, Slate and the like. Enter stage left, Francesco Baschieri (CEO of a podcast marketing research company), Dana Chivvis (producer of a certain podcast called *Serial*) and me (billed as Editor of a new journal of audio criticism, *RadioDoc Review*).

For an academic researching radio documentary, which is what I mostly was at the time, to say this was surreal is beyond understatement. We were used to being relegated to a small room at media/comms conferences, at which a mere handful of scholars might make it to your session. Now I was gazing at these high-powered media moguls, who – best of all compliments – had actually put away their phones.

They were there, of course, to hear about *Serial*. Just six months before, in December 2014, it had dropped the last of 12 episodes, setting records for the most downloaded narrative podcast that are STILL off the charts – five million downloads in the first month and hundreds of millions by now.

The media executives wanted to know what was *Serial's* special sauce.

Over a decade on, we've had a good run at defining that. It was partly the cliffhanging suspense of a murder mystery, told week by week, as a 'live' investigation. It was helped by strong production values, from the experienced *This American Life* team, along with the lucky coincidence of launching just as Apple placed a bespoke podcast app on their iPhone. And perhaps most of all, it had a host in Sarah Koenig who talked to you with the ease and intimacy of your new best friend.

None of these things – apart from the iPhone app – were new. Serialisation goes back to at least Dickens. Audio storytelling craft started in the 1920s and '30s. And the intimacy of radio has been celebrated since Franklin D. Roosevelt's so-called 'fireside chats' to the American nation in the 1930s.

But what *Serial* indisputably did, was make audio storytelling SEXY.

What *Serial* also did, that day in Barcelona, was get me an improbably large audience for a message I and others had been trying to convey to the media studies field:

- Audio Is NOT LESS THAN Film or TV

- Audio can create characters inside your head as powerfully as those in a great novel
- Audio can move you to tears, or make you laugh, or gasp, via sound alone
- Audio can free your imagination

All these points had been argued with insight and originality in the three issues of *RadioDoc Review* I'd published by then. I'd conceived *RadioDoc Review* because of a dearth of in-depth critical analysis of the crafted audio form. As both an audio MAKER as well as an academic, I wished the two sides could be in conversation. And so in a serendipitous moment, I sent out a clarion call for disparate lovers of the built audio form to come together, select pieces and write about works that moved or inspired or challenged us. This happened at a Radio Studies conference in Luton, UK, in 2013.

The very first article was by Seán Street, the first Professor of Radio in the UK, who wrote about the Danish poet and producer Pejk Malinowski's feature, *Poetry, Texas* – the title is a pun on a place in that state. In parsing this gentle, luminous piece, Seán noted that we interpret *feelings* absorbed through sound in what he terms 'a partnership between memory and imagination' (Street 2014). This phrase has stuck with me over the years, as a key understanding of how as listeners we co-create the meaning of carefully choreographed sound.

When that review was published, Alan Hall, founder of the independent UK audio production company Falling Tree Productions, enthused on social media that this criticism was 'invaluable'. Alan went on to write penetrating reviews for us, including of Jens Jarisch's Prix Italia-winning *Children of Sodom and Gomorrah*, a piece that presciently explores the troubled path of young Africans seeking refuge in Europe.

I met Jens at the International Feature Conference shortly after we published Alan's review, which while saluting his masterful production, had also queried the ethics of some of his creative juxtapositions. I wondered if Jens would be upset – but in fact he was elated. He longed to be challenged and stimulated, as Alan's review had done. Because perhaps only a peer (Alan has himself won the Prix Italia and is still making glorious audio) could so fully appreciate how Jens had composed the work.

But back to Barcelona. Before this A-List non-audio-facing audience, I set out a very truncated idea of the built audio form and the perceptive and growing wisdom accruing around it in forums such as *RadioDoc Review*. Then I played them clips from esoteric works. Afterwards, prominent media people confided in me their secret or stifled love of audio, and the thrill they felt at the sudden boom in podcasting, and where it might go. There was an aura of allure and excitement around being *licensed*

to like the humble medium of audio. The ears of these key media innovators were momentarily open, aware.

Fast forward three years, and podcasting's cosy DIY world of chumcasts, chatcasts, narrative podcasts and hybrid formats (like the delicious *My Dad Wrote a Porno*) is too commercially appealing to be left to its own devices. *The New York Times* has had huge success with a narrative news format, *The Daily*, that will soon have more listeners than the paper has readers.

Into what one executive called this 'sea of niches' steps Spotify. It will introduce paywalls, in direct contradiction of the open garden system envisaged by Dave Winer when he co-created the RSS feed that allowed most of us to listen to podcasts absolutely free (McHugh 2022, 100). Joe Rogan was an early – and expensive – Spotify trophy.

Some folk will become celebrities because of their podcast – Lex Fridman, for instance, goes from being a novice academic at MIT writing about AI and EVs, to a guy with six million downloads of his show. That's after he attracts the imprimatur of Elon Musk, but still.

Existing celebrities want their own podcast. Conan O'Brien, Mel Robbins, Michelle Obama ... celebrities interrogate other celebrities about 'the messiness of being human' (here I'm talking Armchair Expert with Dax Shepard). In other words, celebrities now want to seem authentic. Because authenticity is one of the characteristics listeners value about podcasting, right? (For more on this, check out articles by Berry, Lindgren, McHugh, that I reference in the abstract).

Celebrities aren't the only ones who've muscled in on the orphan cousin of radio that podcasting once seemed to be. A couple of years back, I started seeing industry newsletters about THE PIVOT TO VIDEO. They offered advice, not on which microphone delivered the best sound or value, but on which LOOKED the most impressive, the most Podcast-Hosty. Analysts had started pointing out the powerful parasocial relationship between podcast hosts and their fans, and advertisers were salivating.

The acme – or nadir – came when a social media post showed a grab of a 'podcaster' wearing headphones and speaking animatedly into a hefty microphone to sell some message. It turned out he didn't actually have a podcast. He was just usurping the cachet of being A Podcaster.

YouTube soon spotted an opportunity. It made podcasts easy to upload for makers and easier for consumers to discover, and to connect as fans. Plus these shows could be more directly monetised. No wonder YouTube overtook the

competition as *the* most popular platform for podcast users. And as a visual platform, to help a show stand out, use of imagery increased.¹

Soon media watchers started describing the new tranche of video podcast hosts with their chat/interview formats as reinvented late night TV talk show hosts.

‘To call podcasts even an audio medium would be selling it short, because “podcast” now refers to just about anything with recorded speech’ said an *Esquire* reporter last December (Menapace 2025). ‘The word “podcast” already has an archaic early-internet ring to it. Like referring to “the world wide web” says a recent piece in *The Times* (Marriott et al 2025).

What’s NOT in question is how important podcasts – however we define them – have become. Podcasts are now well and truly mainstream – they’re ‘as much a part of our culture as telly or TikTok’, says the *Times* again. This is affirmed by audio scholar David Dowling, who wrote recently that ‘podcasts are now a central component in global media ecosystems’ (2025). Dowling whittles down the distinctive characteristics of podcast journalism to three: Intimacy, Reflexivity and Democracy.

Intimacy, he says, refers to ‘production and narrative strategies (personal narrative, informal tone, cadence, and delivery), listening modalities (headphones, private or semi-private listening, asynchronous), and affective rationality (parasocial relations, trust.’

On reflexivity, Dowling explains: ‘Podcast journalism often makes its own process visible, particularly when hosts disclose reporting challenges, ethical trade-offs, source verification, and uncertain evidence.’

And

‘The concept of democracy encompasses both inclusion (of marginalized voices, diverse perspectives, low barriers to entry) and its counterforces (inequality in reach, ideological polarization, platform-mediated gatekeeping).’

This last aspect, democracy, brings to mind two scholarly articles I ran across: one theorises what they call ‘access intimacy’ in the context of Indian podcasts that canvass disability injustice (in press, *Asian Studies Review*). Audio podcasts, they argue, avoid the visual rhetorics of disability and their objectifying representations of disabled bodies. The other article (in press, *Continuum*) proposes that blind podcasters in China are transforming constraint into creative recoding, where accessibility is authored through voice, rhythm, and resonance to co-create sonic publics as resistance and innovation. Just two further examples of how liberating

¹ On 16 February 2026, Apple announced ‘a new video podcast experience’ on their platform (Apple 2026), positioning them alongside market leaders YouTube and Spotify. The implications of this, including Apple’s move to monetise podcasts for the first time, are well covered by James Cridland (2026) in *Podnews*.

AUDIO is compared to video, a theme I've harped on about a lot. Audio, happily, frees us from judgement based on appearance.

But let's think about NARRATIVE NONFICTION PODCASTS specifically.

To Dowling's triad of podcast journalism traits, I'd add a fourth for this genre: AESTHETICS. Elegant writing, strong structure and well judged choreography of sound can elevate podcast journalism to an art form.

So where are *narrative podcasts* headed in this global media ecosystem? Last year, the *Serial*-induced bubble burst. Well regarded indie production companies went bust: Pineapple Street Studios (who made the cheeky *Wind of Change*) and Campside Media (who did the absorbing *Wild Boys*). Even slick corporate Wondery hived off its large narrative team, responsible for shows such as *The Shrink Next Door*, which had gone to commercial podcast heaven and been adapted as an Apple TV series.

So is it over?? Is finely honed audio storytelling finished? Must we embrace video as the new podcast form? Maybe not. A recent *Guardian* article pointing to how poorly video serves any kind of podcast format that is not just talking heads has had a lot of industry traction. In it, one of the UK's most esteemed audio producers fearlessly proclaimed – at last – that the Video Podcast Emperor Had No Clothes. Eleanor McDowall, a co-director of Falling Tree Productions, told the paper:

The absence of images from radio and podcasting isn't some failure of technology. These audio mediums have grown from a deep love of sound and its imaginative possibilities. When I hear people say the future of audio is essentially television, it makes me feel they never knew what was exciting about sound in the first place. (Sturges 2025b)

Brava Eleanor. Because that's the nub of it.

Do we make podcasts that are essentially television, or do we pursue and deepen our relationship with sound and its imaginative possibilities, via the narrative podcast form unleashed so spectacularly by *Serial*, but also played and experimented with for about a century as a built audio storytelling mode.

I'm thinking of the extravaganzas DJ Bridson made for the BBC in the 1930s – panoramic audio used to tell epic stories such as the Battle of Culloden. Of the amazing *Radio Ballads* of Ewan MacColl, Peggy Seeger and Charles Parker, that braided actuality and real workers' voices and songs in a tightly layered format, whose precision is astonishing to contemplate as a pre-digital art form.

In the US, I'm thinking of Norman Corwin and Studs Terkel's *Born To Live* and David Isay's *The Sunshine Hotel* and *Ghetto Life 101* and later experimenters like Nick van der Kolk, the understated genius of Jonathan Goldstein's *Heavyweight*, Madeleine Baran's *In the Dark* and Brian Reed and Julie Snyder's *S-Town*.

In Australia, I'm thinking of the ABC's *Unravel* and *Bowraville*'s Indigenous voices and some I've been lucky to work on like *The Greatest Menace*. And all the other imaginative narrative podcasts and audio stories and compositions that harness and celebrate all that is exciting about sound.

Because video *can't do* multitracked, composed, choreographed audio. That form lives in our head, between our ears, a partnership between memory and imagination. A narrative podcast is a sonic journey that draws on texture, tone and temporality, evoking individualised sensory responses as it unfolds in real time. It can't be reduced to a screen.

And while I love the Alchemy of the Mix as much as anyone, it's not necessarily fancy sound design that can pierce the heart and mind – narrative podcasts are anchored and emotionally grounded in the affective power of the human voice. Which can bring us undone without any embellishment. Or an image. In fact the voice has MORE power when we're not distracted by a visual.

Are there creative outliers in the Video Podcasts world?

Yes, a few. In Australia, Matt Bevan makes a show called *If You're Listening*, which tackles a serious global topic in a playful way. He makes separate video and audio mixes for the same theme. This sensibly plays to the different strengths of each medium. For instance, as a backgrounder to the tensions in Venezuela, he made an episode on the US arrest of Panama leader Colonel Noriega for drug trafficking back in the day (Bevan 2026). A close-up shows Noriega's pockmarked skin. This detail matters. Why? Next is an image of Panama's opposition leader, Dr Hugo Spadafora. A reporter tells us that Noriega held a grudge against Spadafora because of his movie star good looks. Which likely explains why he had him decapitated, while alive. In this context, the image of Spadafora is a valuable, if gruesome, addition to the storytelling.

Others who appreciate audio are taking up the video challenge. The amazing team who make *Have You Heard George's Podcast* (featured by the way in *RadioDoc Review*) are reprising episodes as video for YouTube. 'We need to go where the audience is,' Ben Benbrick, the producer and composer, explained. 'Even if your strategy is audio-first, it's insane to leave out [YouTube]' (Sturges 2025a).

Maybe their reincarnation will win the new 'outstanding visual podcasting' gong at the British Podcasting Awards.

Coda

I wish such genuinely creative efforts well. But let's just be clear that these are *different creatures* from how podcasting was conceived – as an AUDIO ARTEFACT.

In one sense, I'm glad about the video push. Because it will slough off the people who see 'podcasts' as only about power, influence and reach. Or only about talk. Let them have their cheapskate TV-manqué 'shows' and their passive audiences, tethered to screens. I'll be out walking my dog, earpods in, pictures forming in my mind from whatever wonders the audio true believers have created. And there's plenty of optimism around.

Gretta Cohn, CEO of Pushkin Industries, a premium podcast network that has survived the narrative downturn, describes masterful audio storytelling well. She's president of the Webby Awards this year, a competition known as the 'Oscars of the Internet'. With podcast entrants, she's looking for bold and deliberate structure, airtight research, sound design that elevates rather than decorates, and most of all, emotional impact (at which audio is unparalleled). On the future of audio podcasts, Cohn (2026) said recently:

After years of scale-at-all-costs, the industry is re-centering on craft: sharper editorial vision, more ambitious storytelling, and stories that take real time to earn trust. I'm also energized by the *global* expansion of narrative audio. We're seeing formats evolve in ways that reflect LOCAL cultures and storytelling traditions, not just U.S. or U.K. models. And I'm excited by the maturity of the audience: listeners are more discerning, more interactive, and more willing to follow creators into deeper, more layered storytelling experiences.

That doesn't sound like a dying art form to me. So, viva the narrative podcast and its passionate tribe of makers. As Cohn (2026) drily observes: 'When creators speak in a voice that's clearly their own [...] you feel it immediately. Authentic work has stakes for the people making it; trend-chasing rarely does.'

Talking head video RESTRICTS our capacity to connect, keeps us *separated* by a screen. Whereas as the great soundscape scholar Raymond Murray Schafer tells us: 'hearing is a way of touching at a distance' (Schafer 2012:102). Jad Abumrad, who creatively illustrates Schafer's theories in his own legendary podcasts such as *Radiolab*, *Dolly Parton's America* and *Fela Kuti: Fear No Man*, puts it simply and poetically: crafted audio is 'where the story and the sound are actually holding hands'. (Taylor 2026)

So, audio friends, I rest my case: may there always be space between our ears for evocative AUDIO storytelling and the imaginative possibilities of sound.

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Note:

This paper was delivered as a keynote at a symposium for World Radio Day, 13 Feb 2026, for MeCCSA (Media, Communication and Cultural Studies Association), UK. The recording of the address can be found [here](#).

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