

Visual Storytelling

Audio Foundations

Let us gather around the campfire and tell tales of the day's adventures.

Long before humans invented writing, they would gather around and tell stories. This was the beginning of audio storytelling, and since that time it has taken many different forms: songs, ballads, radio, and today we can hear podcast and audio stories on sites all across the internet.

Why are we so drawn to Audio Storytelling? It is because audio is intimate. We usually listen to audio pieces while we are alone. We feel like the reporter and subject are talking just to us. We hear not just the words of the characters, but the emotions behind them. A good audio/radio story can take us to a different world, put us there, and invoke our imaginations.

LEARN

Audio storytelling requires us to capture great sound and put it together in a compelling way. The best stories have interesting people or places that can take us there.

Equipment

Let's start off by learning about the equipment used to capture good audio. In order to record audio we will need a recorder, a microphone, headphones, and a good ear.

Audio Recorders: At the center of capturing audio for production is the audio recorder. Recorders come in many different styles, sizes and shapes. The features that separate recorders are; the recording file format, the recording media, portability, the number of recording channels, and the ability to attach external microphones.

Most recorders available now record a digital file. These files can either be .mp3, .wav, windows media files or a proprietary audio format. The .mp3 files are compressed, so that they take up less storage space. This is nice if we want to be able to record longer, but we lose some quality when choosing this format. Radio pros usually record using the broadcast .wav file format. It provides the best quality, but takes up more space.

The digital files are recorded to some sort of storage drive. Sometimes the drive is built into the recorder, and we attach the recorder to our computer (usually through USB) and download the files directly. Sometimes recorders can use external media like SD or Compact Flash cards. Internal recording is more convenient, but the external cards can hold more and be switched between stories.

When we are choosing a recorder, we have to think about what we are going to be using it for. If it is just going to be for note taking, then a small portable .mp3 recorder will be just fine. If we are looking for broadcast quality, we may want something more professional. We might sacrifice some of the portability for the option to record more

than one source at a time or for the ability to attach external microphones. Over time the differences between the consumer and professional have blurred so that sometimes we see pros using small self-contained recorders. Today even these small recorders are producing quality audio.

Some audio recorders already have a microphone built into them. The built in mics are the easiest and quickest way to record an interview. The problem with a built in mic is that they are usually not the best quality. When we want a higher quality recording we need to use an external microphone that is attached to the recorder. These microphones will connect with either a small 1/8" jack, that looks like a headphone jack, or a larger XLR connection. The XLR connection provides better audio, but requires a bigger recorder.

Microphones: External microphones, like recorders, come in many different sizes and shapes, and they can be used for many different purposes. The three types that we will generally use for journalism are handheld, lavalier, and shotgun microphones.

The handheld microphone will be our go to microphone for general reporting. This is a simple stick microphone that we hold close to the mouth and record. We can easily hold the microphone up to whomever we are talking to and record what they are saying. This is the quickest external microphone to get sound into the recorder. One of the big advantages of a handheld microphone is that we, as reporters, have control of the interview. We point the microphone toward the person when we want them to talk and move it back to ourselves when we want to ask a question. Handheld mics can also be placed on a mic stand on a podium or table for press conferences or committee hearings.

Lavalier microphones, called lavs, are small microphones that clip on the interview subject's shirt, tie or lapel. These small mics are used often for video interviews because they are easily hidden, and don't need to be held by the interviewer. They provide good sounding audio because they can be placed directly on the subject. One caution is that sometimes the mics will pick up the ruffling of clothes or the noise from a subject touching his chest.

A shotgun mic is a long microphone that is super directional. They only pick up sound from one direction. These mics are sometimes used as handheld mics, and can be good for eliminating extraneous noise in a crowded environment. Filmmakers use these mics attached to long boom poles to get the microphones close to the actor while still keeping them out of the shot.

When we cover larger events where there are a lot of press people, the organizers will sometimes provide a feed of the audio from the speaker's microphone. They usually provide a mult-box with XLR jacks that we can plug in.

Headphones: When we are recording our audio, we use headphones to make sure we are getting clean audio, with no noise, dropouts or other audio problems. A nice set of headphones can catch issues before they become a problem. Even small earbuds are better than nothing.

A Good Ear: Always listen to what is being recorded. After we are done recording, we should check the audio to make sure we have what we need.

Capturing Audio

Obviously we have to capture good audio in order to tell a good audio story. We need to pay special attention to capturing the best audio possible. Listeners hate bad audio and will quit listening if they aren't getting the quality that they expect. By practicing, we will get proficient with the equipment. Then we can focus on what audio to capture.

Plan Ahead: Most people don't pay much attention to all the noise that is going on around them. We have learned to tune out things that aren't important. Our microphones don't have that ability. They record everything. We have to keep this in mind when planning our stories. Is there a lot of noise in the area that is going to make recording an interview impossible? Are we going to be able to get close enough to the subject to get a mic to them? Do we need to plan for connecting to a multi-box? We have to keep these problems in mind when doing our planning, but we also have to plan for getting the good audio. Is there a time where the natural sound is going to help tell our story? If we are at a school, can we capture a bell ringing? Can we get the hustle and bustle of a train station if we get there late? Careful attention must be paid to both the time and place of the story. Just as we did in photography, we have to anticipate the story and then be there to capture the moment.

Audio Levels: We must always check to make sure that the audio that we are recording is not distorting. Audio distortion happens when the record levels for the audio are set too high or the audio we are recording is too loud. We cannot save distorted audio when we are editing, so we must be sure to set our levels correctly when recording.

Interviews: Most of the time, the main portion of our stories is the interview. The people we talk to will drive our piece and allow the audience to connect to the story. Therefore, in addition to finding people with good information, we also have to find people that sound good. We need people that are easy to understand, have character, and are easy to relate to. Sometimes the smartest, most informed people on a topic are also the most boring. Listeners will notice that and be bored themselves. We don't want that if we can avoid it.

Interviews are usually best in a quiet location. An office, conference room or some other noise free environment makes a good place for a formal interview. If the story is really about a place, sometimes it is better to do the interview in that environment. The natural sound of the location may set the mood that we are looking for. Each story is different, so we have to use our best judgment when scheduling the interview.

Once we are ready to do the interview, there are a few tips that we can use to get the best interview possible. First, have the subject say his or her name and spell it on the recording. This will help in case the audio is separated from our notes and the pronunciation of the name will be there on the recording. Then when we are ready to ask our questions. Open-ended questions get the best answers. Yes or no responses are useless when cutting together the piece. Asking the subject to restate our question in the answer also helps when we go to edit. If we ask the question, "What did you have for breakfast?" It is easier to use an answer, "I had eggs and toast for breakfast," than it is to use an answer with just, "eggs and toast."

One thing that is different from doing an interview for print is that we have to remember to keep quiet while the subject is talking. We need to have the interview audio with out our voice interrupting or commenting while they are talking.

After the interview, we need to record some room tone. Each room will have its own sounds when there is no one talking. If we capture some of that room tone, thirty seconds to a minute, we can use that to cover any gaps that we might have when we do the edit. Ask everyone to be quiet for a few moments and record that “silence.”

The last thing is to do one last check to see if we have the audio that we wanted. If something did go wrong during the recording, it is easier to get another question in while we are all there than it is to get back to the edit to find out.

Phone Interviews: One of the great things about audio stories is that we have access to interviews that we might not with photos or video. If we need an interview, we can call someone on the phone or do an audio interview on the computer. None of these produce the quality and intimacy that we can get from an in person interview, but sometimes location differences can make a face-to-face interview impossible.

Nat Sound: There is a difference between natural sound and noise. Noise is the sound that is going on that doesn't add anything to our story. Nat sound is the audio that transports us to the place in the story, that gives us a sense of what is going on there. In order to get those sounds we have to record them. We have to go to the location with our recorder and record the sounds that we will use in the piece. Get sounds of the crowds, music, machinery, or anything else that sets the location.

Another great way to get the listener into a story is by using descriptions of the people and places that we see. We are the senses of the listener. We are their eyes, hands, and nose. Great descriptions can take an average story and make it wonderful. One useful tip for getting these great descriptions is to describe the scene into the audio recorder while we are still there. Go into detail about the place, the people the subjects of the story. If we record the descriptions while we are there, it will be fresh in our minds and we will remember more than if we hope that our brains retain that detail when we get back to do the edit. Sometimes we aren't doing the edit until days or weeks later. There is no way to remember back that far if we haven't recorded it.

Putting the Story Together

Now that we have captured the raw audio for the story that we want to tell we need to put it together into an interesting and informative piece.

Structure: In our audio story we have to tell the listener what happened. The most basic structure is sequential. We start at the beginning, move to the middle, and then the end. It can be as simple as that. There are certainly other ways to tell a story, but keeping it simple is usually the best path to follow. The story may be very complex, but we want to break it down to the point that our audience could easily understand it. This may mean that we spend a lot of time reporting and interview people, but only use a small fraction of the material that we have collected. Our goal is to tell the story as simply as we can.

If we are making stories for radio news, we are limited for time in our stories. Most news stories will be under a minute. In order to get our stories that short we are going to have to compress the interviews. Our subjects might have told us a great story, but it might have taken three minutes to tell it. In order for us to use the story, we are going to have to make it shorter. The easiest way to do that is for us to tell part of the story. We might have a sentence or two telling the first part of the story, then cut to a ten second clip of the subject telling the middle of the story and then back to us finishing off the story in a sentence. What was once a three-minute story is now only thirty seconds. Go on to the next person with an opposing view and compress that story and we are well on our way to putting together a short news package. Add a sentence about the next step in the story and we are finished.

On the Internet, we are not as limited in the length of our audio stories, but that doesn't mean that we should let them get out of hand. If our pieces are longer than two or three minutes, we might want to think about cutting them down. We are also free to experiment with structure on the Internet. We still want to tell a simple story, but we might be able to use longer clips, bring in music, or let the natural sound linger.

Sound Bites: When we cut the interview up into small clips the best is what we choose for our sound bites. These are the short audio clips that best tell the story. Maybe it is the most important information, or maybe it is just a great turn of phrase or interesting story. If we have chosen good characters to interview, given them a chance to answer open-ended questions, we are probably going to end up with some good clips to use in our story. We start by choosing the best clips because these are what is going to make the story unique. When we have found the right sound bites, we can write around them to tell the story.

In addition to the interview sound bites, it is important to find the best of our natural sound. Gather up the few pieces that really put the listener in the story and keep those in mind for when we bring everything together.

Writing Narration: Sometimes we might be able to tell the story just using the words from the interview subjects and the natural sound that we have collected, but in most cases we are going to have to add some of our own words to tell the story. We must use our narration to get out the facts and to help the story flow smoothly through the sound bites.

Some quick tips to use while writing are: get the listener interested quickly, tell them why they should care in the first ten seconds, keep the sentences simple, don't over use numbers, use the name of the person before the persons clip, and read it out loud to make sure it sounds natural.

Voicing Narration: Once we have written our narration, we must now record that narration. We can either use our portable recorder to record the narration, or record to a computer in a voice over booth or quiet space.

The secret to great narration is to talk as we would talk to a friend or family member. Just tell them the story as we would after we get home. While this seems simple, it can become complicated if we think too much about it. People get nervous when it comes to actually recording the audio. Relax, with practice, it all becomes easier.

Marking the Script: Sometimes it is easier to read the script if we mark the places that we want to emphasize and where we want to pause. Some radio readers will fall into a singsong rhythm emphasizing random words throughout the sentence. It is better to only emphasize the one or two important words in each sentence. This gives the listener a clue to the important things in the story. If we underline the words that we want to emphasize, we will have a visual guide while we are reading. The other things that we can mark are pauses. Most of us tend to rush through our narration. If we put lines in the script where we want to pause, this will help slow us down as we are reading.

Slow Down: Relax. Breathe. Repeat.

Edit the Story: Once we have all of the pieces together, the sound bites, the nat sound, our narration, we can edit our story together. The program that we use doesn't matter. If we are comfortable with a simple audio program like Audacity, or a more complex program like Soundbooth, Audition, or ProTools, or even a video editing program like Final Cut Pro or Premiere, we can use any of these to put the story together. Use the script that we wrote earlier as a foundation. Put the clips together, but leave enough space between them to make the audio flow like a normal conversation. We can then fill any noticeable gaps with the room tone or nat sound that we have collected.

Delivering the Story

Audio Stories: For years radio has been the place for audio stories, but now there are websites and podcast that feature just audio stories. Audio stories can be the most enjoyable multimedia projects to create because of the flexibility that is available with editing only audio.

Audio Slideshows: While audio only stories are prevalent on the web, many sites prefer pictures to go along with the audio. We can make audio slideshows in flash with a program like SoundSlides or Flash, or as a video with still pictures and audio. Video files are easier to distribute and are readable on most devices.

When we are adding photos to our audio pieces, we have to remember that they need to help tell the story. The photos should bring the words to life and add visual interest that might be missing from a strictly audio piece. Planning for an audio slideshow takes extra preparation beforehand and time to shoot while gathering the story. If done correctly the photo side can take as much time as the audio portion.

DO

Assignment: Team up with a partner. Interview each other and find out something that we don't know about the other. Find the best clips and each of you cut together a short audio story about the other. Keep it under one minute. Use narration if you need it, but it is not required.

Export your finished piece and put it in the audio workshop folder on the shared drive. We will spend the last part of the workshop together reviewing everyone's stories.

Learn More

If you want to work in public radio, read the book - *Sound Reporting: The NPR Guide to Audio Journalism and Production*. It is the best book available for getting to know that world. The book is under \$20, and it will give you a better education on audio journalism than I ever could.

National Public Radio (<http://npr.org/>)

This American Life (<http://www.thisamericanlife.org/>)

Radio Lab (<http://www.radiolab.org/>)

REVIEW

In the beginning, it is helpful to use the following table to see if we have used each element to better tell our story. With practice, these elements will become so ingrained that we won't have to think about them.

Captured Audio					
Good Clean Interview					
No Distortion					
Nat Sound					
The Story					
Simple and Understandable					
Good Sound Bites					
Interesting Characters					
Emotion from the Voice					
Sounds and Descriptions Take Listener to the Location					
News Writing					
Voice Narration					
Informative					
Objective					
Untold Before					
Slideshows					
Photos Add to the Story					
Good Captions					