

‘This Australian life’: the Americanisation of radio storytelling in Australia

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Abstract

This article explores the impact of US storytelling forms on the radio documentary genre in Australia. Building on Lindgren and McHugh’s (2013) article outlining emerging trends in radio documentary forms in the United States and Australia, it highlights a growing interest in radio documentary production. The empirical study takes a dual approach through an online survey and semi-structured interviews with Australian radio producers. It maps how an up-and-coming cohort of radio producers understands the genre and what influences their practice. The study shows how the genre is undergoing rapid change and provides insights into the role played by both public broadcaster ABC Radio National and community radio in facilitating this new wave of radio production. Of particular significance is the role played by community radio in fostering a new generation of radio feature documentary producers.

Introduction

When I listen to a lot of the podcasts that I really like, so *This American life*, *Radiolab*, *The moth*, all those kinds of podcasts, I listen to every week, people think that I’m nuts because what I do, is I lie on the floor on my back with my eyes closed, with headphones on and totally trap myself in it. (Indigo Wood, freelance radio producer, 2014)

In his 2009 book *Key concepts in radio studies*, UK radio scholar Hugh Chignell described the radio documentary genre as just surviving on public radio, and the radio feature as “a particularly intriguing radio phenomenon” that is “almost extinct” (2009, p. 23). Chignell uses the two radio forms – documentary and radio feature – interchangeably because of their similarities (as will this article). He was describing a niche radio genre predominantly offered on terrestrial public service radio before the liberation of radio waves through podcasting technology and mobile devices. In 2009 it would have been difficult to imagine the media landscape of 2014. Contrary to Chignell’s dire prediction, the radio documentary form is far from dead; instead this type of “built” radio, focusing on stories where any mix of scripted words, sounds, interviews, archival materials and

music is used to create a narrative, is experiencing what has been described as a renaissance. In the US, this is thanks to a growing public and independent radio sector (Loviglio & Hilmes, 2013, p. 3), and also to technologies that allow this evanescent medium to be captured and shared with international audiences.

The renewed interest in radio stories coincides with a modern obsession with personal stories. There are more ways than ever before to share every detail of our lives with the world via a plethora of digital platforms and social networks. In the words of Joe Lambert, who started the Center for Digital Storytelling at Berkeley in 1998: “We can imagine a thousand new ways to lure us into sharing our stories. We are just beginning to see how our creativity will become our main ways of entertaining each other” (Lambert, 2013, p. 4). And people’s personal stories are now a commonplace feature for everything from advertising to public health campaigns.

Radio is so ubiquitous in everyday life that it is often taken for granted (Lewis, 2000, p. 161). It has traditionally been labelled a secondary medium: the listening is done alone while doing other things, such as driving a car (Fleming, 2002, p. 1). According to Fleming (2002), its secondary nature contributes to the perception that it is somehow lesser than other media, lacking some of their power and impact. However, instead of being seen as inferior, radio’s ability to keep us company while making breakfast in the kitchen or sharing today’s headlines through headphones during a morning walk is really its strength. Radio is described as the most intimate and personal of mediums, and as authentic and trustworthy (see Berry, 2006; Crisell, 1986; Fleming, 2002; Lewis, 2000; Tacchi, 2000). As such, it is a perfect match for storytelling where first-person narratives are used to share personal experiences through the powerful intimacy of the voice. This intimacy has increased with portable technology, which allows us to access stories through headphones and mobile devices, physically locating the personal voices inside of our heads.

In the US, popular storytelling radio shows such as *This American life* (TAL) and *Radiolab* are attracting a new generation of both listeners and would-be producers to radio. TAL is an award-winning weekly radio show produced by Chicago Public Media, broadcast to approximately 2.1 million listeners on over 500 stations (*This American life*, 2014a). There are multiple ways to access the show, through podcasting, streaming or downloading a la carte episodes from the website, via smartphone apps or by purchasing episodes. Approximately 1 million people download the TAL podcast every week (*This American life*, 2014a). TAL presenter Ira Glass also draws big audiences for his public performances. His 2012 Australian tour was sold out and his YouTube talks about the power of the story are often consulted by students of radio production. For Glass, telling stories to each other helps us to make sense of the world and ourselves: “Narrative itself is like a back door into a very deep place inside of us. ... When a story gets inside of us, it makes us less crazy” (PRI Public Radio International, 2009). Recently the blockbuster non-fiction podcast *Serial*, produced by *This American life* producer Sarah Koenig, has shown the powerful international attraction of the audio storytelling format.

The appeal of radio storytelling is evident in Australia as well. The distinctive American, personality-led, story-driven radio style is popular with listeners and, as this article shows, with many radio documentary producers. Some producers interviewed in this study said their appreciation of *This American life* was their original inspiration to make radio, and they continue to emulate the program. Claudia Taranto, Executive Producer for the now-defunct ABC Radio National (RN) documentary program *360Documentaries*¹, was able to quantify this growing interest by considering the number of freelance proposals she received. Five years ago she would receive one pitch per week; by 2013 she was receiving one pitch per day (Taranto, in Lindgren & McHugh, 2013, p. 107).

This article describes an empirical study which aims to identify the reasons behind the renewed interest in radio storytelling in Australia. It builds on Lindgren and McHugh’s (2013) article mapping emerging trends in radio documentary forms in the US and Australia, which high-

lighted a dramatic increase in the number of people wanting to produce radio documentaries over recent years. It takes a broad definition of the word “documentary” to include both short and long forms of radio stories, also described as radio features. It focuses on people who are relatively new to documentary production, with the aim of understanding how the upcoming generation of producers understands the genre. It looks at a wide range of issues such as professional identity; the attraction of the radio medium; the impact of global access to programming and how the predominately US style is influencing what is produced for Australian radio; and the role of both community radio and ABC RN in fostering the next generation of radio producers.

Radio documentary and academic inquiry

The radio documentary genre is a small but evolving field of academic inquiry (see, for example, Aroney, 2005; Hendy, 2004; Madsen, 2013, for a history of the genre; Lindgren, 2011, for an interview study with international documentary producers; Lindgren & McHugh, 2013, pp. 102-103, for a literature overview; and Scannell, 1986, for a UK historical overview). As yet, little attention has been paid to the professional culture of radio documentary production in Australia and its influences, including the role of the producer in driving changing formats and processes. The small number of studies that offers a comparable approach includes Allan Jones’ (2011) detailed examination of one broadcaster’s (Mary Adams) role in shaping early science broadcasting at the BBC. Jones argues that during the 1930s, Adams and her colleagues in this new field of science broadcasting had to construct a “professional jurisdiction” encompassing activities such as editorial control and trying to understand audience’s tastes (Jones, 2011, p. 979). David Dunaway (2000) uses observations and interviews with radio producers in the UK and Denmark to explore how digital technologies are shaped by old practices and how digital production influences aesthetic decisions in the creative process of making radio. Outside radio, Vicki Mayer, Miranda Banks and John Caldwell’s (2009) edited collection *Production studies* takes a case study approach to studying media producers and their practices, in this case people involved in TV production. It uses lived experiences of media practitioners as the subject for “theorizing production as culture” (Mayer et al., 2009, p. 4). Similarly, in her later work on television production studies, Mayer (2011) uses interviews with and observations of industry professionals to analyse media industry practice.

The growing scholarly and public interest in radio documentary studies is further illustrated by the new online journal *RadioDocReview* and a growing number of online sites dedicated to critiquing the radio documentary form as well as offering practical tips (for example, Transom.org; *This American life* [2014b]). Another example is the inaugural radio MOOC (Massive Online Open Course) called Transnational Radio Stories in 2014 and dedicated to radio storytelling. The online course ran from Germany and explored radio’s transnationality, its expression of personal and national identity and its methods of storytelling. It set out to answer questions about why we remain fascinated by radio and if there are any global rules for production of radio stories (Online Radio, 2014).

The aim of the study described in this article was to explore modern-day radio documentary practice from the perspective of a new generation of radio producers. What changes is the genre experiencing? How are new technologies and globalisation impacting on it? Is there indeed a renaissance in radio storytelling, and how might it be further fostered?

Radio documentary forms in Australia

Traditionally the radio documentary form has been broadcast predominantly on public service radio in Australia. Before the ABC cuts announced in November 2014, documentary forms

were heard on a range of RN programs such as *Hindsight*, *Into the music* and the then flagship documentary program *360Documentaries*, which used to commission 15 stories each year (Taranto, in Lindgren & McHugh, 2013, p. 107). Two new radio shows introduced in 2014 under the umbrella of RN's Creative Audio Unit also feature creative radio non-fiction and fiction storytelling: *Radiotonic* and *Soundproof*. At the time of writing, there are plans to introduce a new half-hour documentary program tentatively named *RN docs* to run Monday to Thursday on ABC RN. However, the form is also thriving on some community radio stations. The weekly show *All the best*, produced for community station FBi Radio in Sydney, is spearheading short-form radio documentaries as well as personal narratives, interviews and fiction in its storytelling (*All the best*, 2014). The show is broadcast nationally via the Community Radio Network and it runs workshops for people wanting to produce radio stories for the program. Documentary forms also appear on other community stations such as RRR, SYN FM and 2CR/3CR, to mention only a few. In addition to public service and community radio programs, the independent sector also offers radio documentaries through innovative projects including the web-based Paper Radio in Melbourne. It offers a range of fictional and non-fictional audio formats available online and via podcast and currently is in collaboration with ABC RN (Paper Radio, 2014).

The study

This article is based on an empirical study, carried out between March and July prior to the November 2014 budget cuts announcement, combining quantitative and qualitative methods of collecting data (see, for example, Creswell, 2011; Denzin & Lincoln, 2013; Neuman, 2004). It included an online questionnaire as well as semi-structured interviews. In the online survey, in addition to standard demographic information, participants were asked about their professional identity, their affiliation with the radio industry, how they listen to radio, their radio training and their production practices. The survey results informed the design of the interview questions for the semi-structured interviews. The combination of the two methods allowed for a more nuanced and deeper exploration of the trends in radio production forms drawn from the reflections of the radio producers themselves. As this study looks specifically at trends in Australian radio documentary forms and influences from US production styles, only Australian radio producers were selected in surveys and interviews.

It is difficult to estimate how many radio feature documentary producers there are in Australia. At the time of this study, the public broadcaster ABC RN employed six full-time and five part-time documentary/feature producers working across the three programs *360Documentaries*, *Hindsight* and *Into the music*. Each program also employed an Executive Producer (Taranto, 2013a). RN's new Creative Audio Unit has three producers (Jokiranta, 2014). The Australian Radio Collective has 136 Facebook members at the time of writing and the South Australian Radio Collective (SARC) has 331 "likes" of its page. In addition, there would be a number of producers who are not members of those groups. There is no reliable way to establish how many people produce radio documentaries. It is, however, clear that, being a niche genre, the number of radio documentary producers in Australia would be relatively small, which would obviously impact on the potential size of the survey sample. The online survey was distributed via social media networks targeting exclusively Australian producers, for example, the closed Facebook group of the Australian Radio Collective (ARC) and the Facebook page for the South Australian Radio Collective (SARC). The URL link to the survey was also shared via the author's personal Facebook accounts. The survey was open for three months from May to August 2014 and garnered 63 responses.

Interviews were conducted with 11 Australian radio documentary producers. Some of the interviewees were follow-ups from the surveys where participants indicated their interest in participating in an interview; others were generated through recommendations using snowball-sampling techniques (Noy, 2008). The recorded and transcribed interviews generally lasted 60-80 minutes².

The online survey: who are the radio documentary producers in Australia, and what do they produce?

According to the survey results, 41 per cent of the respondents are between 25 and 33 years old; 15 per cent are between 34 and 44. Over 87 per cent of the respondents have an undergraduate or postgraduate degree and there are more women (52 per cent) than men (42 per cent)³.

Only a minority of the survey participants define themselves as a journalist (14 per cent) or broadcaster (11 per cent). The majority use a variety of separate or combinations of descriptors to reflect their professional role, such as “radio producer, producer, storyteller, writer, facilitator, sound designer, journalism educator, academic, historian”. This indicates a lack of commonly agreed definitions of the professional identity of radio documentary producers.

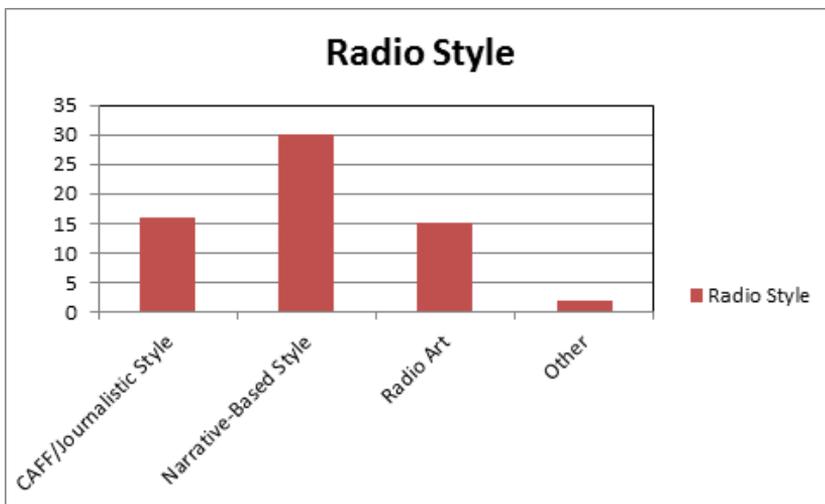
Unpaid work

The majority of the producers surveyed are freelancers or volunteers. Just over half of them describe radio documentary-making as a hobby, but they would like it to be a job. Seventeen per cent say they are applying for jobs in radio. Just under a quarter (24 per cent) have paid employment in radio but not necessarily in radio documentary production. Many of the survey participants have produced documentaries for both public service and community radio. A third of them have produced content for the ABC (predominantly RN), while half have produced documentaries for community stations such as the Melbourne-based 3CR, RRR, SYN-FM and for the Sydney program *All the best*. With limited opportunities for funded work available in Australia, mainly through RN, this means that half of the producers who responded to the survey are not being paid for their radio documentary productions.

The documentaries

Three-quarters of the participants (74 per cent) in the survey part of this study agreed there is a growing interest in radio (and audio) production. Most of the radio makers produce short documentaries under 10 minutes duration (42 per cent), whereas 21 per cent of the programs were between 21 and 30 minutes long. Only a small group (14 per cent) have produced a 45-60 minute program. As far as style was concerned, a majority of the producers described their documentaries as “narrative-based”, in the sense that *TAL* was described as driven by a strong narrative (see Table 1).

Table 1: Radio style



Total respondents: 43

In summary, the survey results paint a picture of Australian radio producers as a group of highly educated people who are mostly freelancers or volunteers, with half of them describing making radio documentaries as a hobby. This is further highlighted by half of them having produced content without being paid for their work. The survey also shows a lack of a commonly defined professional identity in the group.

The interviews: changing faces and forms of radio documentary

This section drills deeper into some of the issues identified in the survey, through semi-structured interviews with 11 Australian radio producers, conducted in an attempt to understand how this specialist area of radio documentary form is evolving through external influences, technological change and the attraction of personality-driven narratives.

The 11 producers interviewed⁴ comprise four men and seven women, with varied experience in radio production. Seven of them are involved in community radio; one is doing a PhD comprising radio documentary productions for ABC RN; one is a writer/editor and producer of *The radio hour* storytelling event; and two are freelancing for ABC Radio National. Although some have worked in community radio for a long time, many are relatively new to production of radio documentaries.

The themes that emerged from the interview data are analysed in detail below, to explore the sustained and increased lure of radio documentary forms, current evolution through podcasts, mobile technologies and international influences, and understandings of professional roles.

Forms and influences of radio documentary production

Some producers had studied journalism at university, but many were largely self-taught, gaining experience through community radio stations and spending many hours honing their craft. Producer Rachael Bongiorno (2014) describes “studying” radio by closely and carefully listening to radio she likes and taking notes. Almost every producer involved in this study listens to US National Public Radio (NPR), as well as ABC RN. Some producers also listen to the BBC and independent production houses, such as Falling Tree Productions (UK), and community radio (usually for the station with which they are involved). Several producers declared they would never miss an episode of *This American life*. As one producer says: “So definitely as far as regular listening, those dominant American shows definitely loom large still for me” (Kranz, 2014).

The 11 interviewed producers confirm the predominance of the American storytelling shows. Some producers even said their appreciation of *This American life* was their original inspiration to make radio, and they continue to emulate the program:

I really started listening to *This American life* in 2007 or 2008 online so that really drew me in. (Public broadcasting radio producer, 2014)

I love things like *Radiolab*, *This American life*. I’ve become really, really engaged and really interested and inspired by the stuff that I’ve discovered that’s done by NPR. I think it’s a really interesting style. (Wood, 2014)

The radio program *All the best* on community station FBi in Sydney has self-consciously positioned itself as an Australian version of *This American life*, mixing live content, fiction, features and documentaries. Heidi Pett, Features Executive Producer with the program, encourages potential producers to find the human element in a story and find a character that people can identify with who will take them through the story (Pett, 2014).

The producers describe the influential and compelling American storytelling format as personality-led, story-driven radio with a rather brash style. This is compared with a slow and clear speaking, authoritative, formal (Rogers, 2014; Tjhia, 2014) and more “introspective” (Public

broadcasting radio producer, 2014) style that characterises ABC RN. The producers agree that the tone of ABC RN can feel old-fashioned, serious and staid, especially after listening to the new school of American radio: “To hear people not talking normally while they’re telling stories, I think it’s dawning on us slowly that it’s a bit strange” (Rogers, 2014). There was a feeling among the participants that we may be witnessing a shift towards a more casual, everyday tone in voice, more akin to the style of NPR (Public broadcasting radio producer, 2014; Rogers, 2014; Tjhia, 2014). The presence of the producers in stories and on-air is another difference, and Heidi Pett describes listening to US radio as being part of a “little community of friends whereas with Australian radio you definitely feel like you’re just listening to individual stories” (Pett, 2014).

That seems to be the abstract, archival use of stuff [at RN] and it’s very well produced and it can sound beautiful but it doesn’t really grab you. It’s not really telling a person’s story, it’s more of an experience and that’s something that I do associate with Radio National and as much as I really love Radio National, I would like to hear more of this new stuff coming through. (Public broadcasting radio producer, 2014)

The difference between storytelling and journalism

For decades, scholars and practitioners alike have discussed the role of storytelling in journalism. Itzhak Roeh has argued that journalistic reporting is a form of storytelling because even though journalism deals with “stories of the real”, those stories are, according to Roeh “construction of meanings” (1989, p. 164). Many of the producers interviewed for this study did differentiate storytelling from journalism. One of the survey respondents described their production style as: “Too emotive to be journalism, too removed to be biographic, not technical enough to be radio art. It’s telling other people’s stories.” They perceive journalism as a hard-edged discipline with a commitment to facts, whereas radio production has the capacity to be more creative, driven by storytelling rather than news (Kranz, 2014; Pett, 2014). Janak Rogers and Jon Tjhia, who produce content for ABC RN, described storytelling and radio journalism as existing on a spectrum without clear divisions marking one from the other. Storytelling was generally understood to allow for greater creativity with sound, ideas, and narrative techniques (Kenneally, 2014). Some producers think of their radio productions as short stories (both fiction and non-fiction), presented in audio rather than print form (Kenneally, 2014; Kranz, 2014; Rosen, 2014). This might be why many producers struggled to apply an accurate label to their role. Those with formal training in journalism who also engaged in print media were comfortable with calling themselves journalists, while others were reluctant to use the term to define themselves, feeling that it described something that had its own code, ethic and set of skills. Radio production and journalism are seen to have skills that overlap, and sometimes are aligned, but although they are related, are different crafts.

The impact of podcasting

Podcasting has liberated radio programs from the need to have access to the terrestrial broadcasting spectrum. The audio can be accessed anywhere in the world. The technology has also freed producers from having to fill a specific timeslot. A podcast can be of any duration: as short as 2 minutes, or as long as 93 minutes. Duration is determined based on the quality of content rather than as stipulated by radio schedules. It can be listened to on a computer or a mobile device. An American study from Edison Research (2014) shows podcasting is on the rise – weekly audio podcast listening in the US grew 25 per cent from 2013. In 2014, 39 million, or 14 per cent, of Americans over 12 years old have listened to a podcast in the last month. The portability of podcasts has also impacted on listening habits, with a majority of US listeners (51 per cent, up from 34 per cent in 2013) now accessing podcasts on their smartphone/tablet/portable audio player (Edison, 2014). Podcasting allows listeners to access international productions not available via

terrestrial radio. *This American life* has been broadcast in Australia since 2011 on ABC RN, but other US radio blockbusters such as *Radiolab* are available to Australian audiences only via podcasts or online streaming. Podcasting has significantly changed how younger listeners access radio. Different ways of listening can be seen to reflect a generational difference: older generations are more likely to continue to listen to terrestrial radio while younger generations are more likely to seek out specific podcasts, follow a handful of programs, and listen to them on computers and mobile devices (Rosen, 2014).

The producers reveal the extent to which podcasting has influenced how they put their stories together. All producers commented on the rise of intentional listening, that is, where listeners actively seek out podcasts and listen to them as a discrete activity, rather than listening passively to whatever is broadcast on a radio in the background. This reflects the producers' personal listening habits, and also what they have observed more broadly.

The longevity of podcasts encourages producers to put more work into their features. The knowledge that podcasts have a degree of permanence, can be sought out, returned to, listened to more than once, motivates the producer to work to a higher standard, knowing that it will be appreciated by audiences for some time into the future. Paper Radio producer Jon Tjhia (2014) says he would not bother producing such high-quality programs if people were only hearing them in a "transient broadcast". Podcasts also allow a greater "playfulness" with sound. While ABC RN is broadcast in mono on AM radio in Australia, podcasts allow for binaural stereo sound. Therefore, more complex sound production can be appreciated through podcasts and listening online than when listening to broadcast radio (Hannan, 2014). Even the technology which allows listening through headphones on the go has an impact on their creative approach:

I love the idea of talking in somebody's head ... it has an effect in the way one looks at a beautiful painting or has an amazing theatre experience ... it's transcendental. (Camilla Hannan, ABC radio producer, 2014)

Don't give up your day job

There is no doubt that mobile and streaming technologies have increased accessibility of radio production for both producers and listeners. Recording and editing software is relatively inexpensive and easy to use. However, this democratisation of radio is limited by the tenuous economic situation for many freelancers.

Even with simple technology, producing high-quality audio stories requires serious time investment. Both the surveyed and interviewed producers unanimously agreed that producing a radio documentary is time consuming and a labour of love. They reported that it takes them weeks or months to produce a documentary, depending on the story's duration and complexity. "Forever" was one response; "honestly, weeks or months" was another. While podcasts can raise the profile of producers and attract big audiences, unless they get sponsored – which few are in Australia – podcasting generally does not provide a return on the investment of time and resources (Tjhia, 2014), although the hugely popular *TAL*-produced *Serial* has shown the capacity for successful productions to attract funding. It has secured a second season through listener donations and sponsorship (*TAL*, 2014c). Most of the producers felt that the payment they received rarely reflected the hours they put in (Kranz, 2014; Public broadcasting radio producer, 2014; Rogers, 2014; Tjhia, 2014).

Even with a scaled-back program schedule, ABC RN will remain the main avenue for paid commissioned radio documentary work in Australia. However, the plan to "rethink delivery of documentary content" on radio in the recently announced round of budget cuts (ABC 2014a) suggests further rationalisation rather than expansion into the future. Work produced for community radio is done on a voluntary basis, although some radio stations pay their Executive Producers.

FBI's *All the best* has received CBAA grant funding to employ Executive Producers, whose roles involve coordinating volunteer producers. The low or non-existent rates of pay mean it is only possible for producers to spend the long time required to produce a documentary if they have a reasonable level of financial security, or other means of making a living.

Many producers agreed that they needed to keep a day job and make radio stories on the side. Many were happy with this arrangement: they enjoyed their day jobs and did not expect to be able to make a living from radio documentary production. Camilla Hannan (2014) compared feature and documentary producers to artists, who never presume they will be able to make a living from their art. A number of producers have day jobs in radio or related media fields. A public broadcasting radio producer (2014) found that her regular work with ABC Local Radio provided inspiration for longer documentary productions. Although some of the producers were satisfied with having to maintain another job, several producers reflected on the downside of freelancing – their capacity to spend long periods of time making feature or documentary productions depended on their having a reasonable level of financial security. On the basis of this study, Australia's cohort of radio documentary producers is largely university-educated and self-sustaining. This suggests a limited demographic able to produce stories, which may be reflected in content favouring middle-class, well-educated perspectives on air.

The role of community radio

Community radio is generally understood as a training ground for mainstream media (see, for example, Rennie, 2006; 2013). In their comprehensive 2007 study of community media in Australia, Michael Meadows and collaborators state that one of the main functions of community broadcasting is to “enable community members to ‘connect’ ... thus creating communities” (Meadows et al, 2007, p. 2). This might offer an explanation for the rise of radio storytelling on community radio. Both the survey results and interviews highlight the role of community radio in the contemporary evolution of the radio feature and documentary genre in Australia. The sector is clearly pivotal in development of radio storytelling, with programs like *All the best* offering access for people to have their radio documentaries broadcast and, in many cases, accessible online and via podcasts. The sense of belonging to a radio community is what Heidi Pett, EP for *All the best*, highlighted as her experience of listening to many of the American shows, but this is also what she sees as missing from RN. A number of the interviewed producers commented on the “forgiving nature” of Executive Producers and the encouragement they provided in facilitating the production of good stories, helping with technicalities or editing in order to complete a good story (Keneally, 2014; Rogers, 2014; Pett, 2014; Wood, 2014). *All the best* puts many resources into encouraging and teaching new and first-time producers, and fostering their skills if they have pitched a strong story (Keneally, 2014; Pett, 2014).

Discussion

The survey responses and interviews clearly document a growing interest in radio storytelling and production of radio documentary forms. They reveal the extent to which US programs such as *TAL* and *Radiolab* are at the forefront of radio's new wave, made readily available to global audiences through podcasting and on-demand radio for anyone with a command of English. The distinctive American narrator-driven production style focusing on personal stories has influenced Australian producers and highlighted that there is room for more varied productions beyond the conventional formats favoured by Australian radio up to now.

Overall the trend in Australia is towards younger, mostly university-educated, producers experimenting with voice, tone and style distinct from what might usually be heard from more established presenters at ABC RN. Many of these presenters had an interest in using a more casual,

everyday tone of voice in their radio narration, and believed that Australian radio would ultimately move in this direction, mimicking an American trend. Claudia Taranto, EP of *360Documentaries* on ABC RN, accepts that forms and styles are changing and if the national broadcaster wants to attract younger audiences enamoured with that style, then “we’ve got to take that on board and incorporate it in some ways into our storytelling as well” (Taranto, 2013b). RN’s new Creative Audio Unit can be seen as an attempt to attract newer audiences to the network by offering a space for creative audio works across genre and forms and with a budget to commission from radio freelancers, artists, writers and musicians. However, it is also clear that community radio is playing an influential role in creating the radio documentary makers of tomorrow. It is here, rather than at the ABC, where talent is being incubated. The fact that so much of this creative work is either underpaid or unpaid raises concerns about the sustainability of this creative sector into the future.

Conclusion

The medium described by Peter Lewis as the “friend, trusted informant and the soundtrack for our living” (2000, p. 167) has reinvented itself as the agile, simple and cheap media sibling in an era of global friendships, likes and an appetite for personal storytelling. As Maura Edmond (2014, p. 3) argues, new audio delivery formats have pushed radio to reflect on its old aesthetics, only to find it continues to rely on its early traits, such as intimacy:

As critics, audiences and radio producers once again re-affirm and re-imagine what makes radio “radio” in a digital age, they continue to depend on aesthetic qualities long associated with radio.

However, the preoccupation with storytelling and the dominance of US radio shows such as *TAL* have also attracted criticism. In her *Griffith Review* essay “This narrated life”, cultural historian Maria Tumarkin (2014) questions the near-obsession with dramatic non-fiction narrative using the form of a personal journey. In a follow-up interview on ABC RN (ABC, 2014b) Tumarkin argues that storytelling can be restrictive, with some events too complex to be explored through a personal narrative. She criticises the formulaic style of storytelling employed by *TAL*, and calls for an acknowledgment of the limitations of storytelling and recognition that stories are not always enough: “They are no substitute for arguments, for debate, for thinking and for cultural practices that are not bound to narrative traditions” (ABC, 2014b). Producer Janak Rogers (2014) puts the obsession with shows like *TAL* down to a “general shift towards narcissism and selfies. As individuals we suddenly think we’re more interesting now than ever before”. Nevertheless, he and other producers see the influence of the American storytelling tradition as shining the light on new ways of radio practice in Australia that go beyond just emulating the US style.

This article highlights a need for new ways of thinking about radio documentary practice. It captures a genre metamorphosing in response to influences from predominantly US production styles and to opportunities afforded by podcasting. It shows freelance and volunteer producers leading the way in experimenting with new formats and approaches, and it points to the role of community and independent radio in proving a site for innovation. It shows a passionate group of producers wanting their stories heard. But it also raises questions about the sustainability of radio documentary production in Australia and how will it be nurtured in an era of media budget cuts. With the recently announced cancellation in 2015 of a number of RN programs featuring documentary forms, how will the ABC continue to nurture both fictional and non-fictional storytelling? The new half-hour documentary program flagged for RN from 2015 will mean the end of long-form audio explorations currently facilitated in one-hour programs such as *Hindsight*, *360Documentaries* and *Into the music*. Regardless of the production being defined as journalistic activity or something else, should producers expect to be paid for their work or will the crea-

tion of radio documentaries be relegated to the hobby corner – as a creative outlet? The study shows a group of highly educated and mostly self-supporting radio producers in Australia, which raises concerns about whether the current model provides enough diversity of voices and the risk of content favouring middle-class, well-educated perspectives on air. This article highlights the scope and need for further work to be done in this growing field of academic inquiry.

Notes

1. The Radio National program *360Documentaries* was one of a number of ABC radio shows featuring features and documentaries to be closed down as a result of Australian Federal Government budget cuts announced in November 2014.
2. Monash University HREC approval 2013001224.
3. The rest declined to identify their gender.
4. All but one of the interviewed producers agreed to be identified by name in this paper: Rachael Bongiorno, Camilla Hannan, Carly Anne Kenneally, Jaye Kranz, Janak Rogers, Zacha Rosen, Jon Tjhia, Helene Thomas, Heidi Pett, Indigo Wood, and a public broadcasting radio producer (in accordance with the conditions of Monash University ethics clearance, this participant has been de-identified).

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