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### Not dead yet: emerging trends in radio documentary forms in Australia and the US

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# Not dead yet: emerging trends in radio documentary forms in Australia and the US

## Abstract

This paper maps contemporary trends in Australian and American radio documentary production. The genre is experiencing a renaissance, as can be seen in the growing number of websites, blogs and podcasts dedicated to radio documentary productions. In addition, the number of freelancers wanting to produce radio documentaries has increased dramatically in Australia over the past five years. This paper traces the evolution of radio documentary forms and explores how globalisation of radio listenership via podcasting and sharing of content on social media is beginning to change documentary. It explores how stellar programs such as *This American Life* (TAL) and *Radiolab* are influencing storytelling forms in Australia, which are moving away from artful, abstract writing through sound, made popular by European producers from the '60s, towards a more first-person, explicitly narrated format favoured by American producers. The study draws on qualitative in-depth interviews with key radio documentary and feature figures from both the US and Australia. It is a scoping study into the under-researched area of radio documentary, focusing on changing storytelling forms in an internationalised media landscape.

## Keywords

trends, emerging, yet, dead, not, us, australia, forms, documentary, radio

## Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Law

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# Not dead yet: emerging trends in radio documentary forms in Australia and the US

Mia Lindgren and Siobhan McHugh

## Abstract

*This paper maps contemporary trends in Australian and American radio documentary production. The genre is experiencing a renaissance, as can be seen in the growing number of websites, blogs and podcasts dedicated to radio documentary productions. In addition, the number of freelancers wanting to produce radio documentaries has increased dramatically in Australia over the past five years. This paper traces the evolution of radio documentary forms and explores how globalisation of radio listenership via podcasting and sharing of content on social media is beginning to change documentary. It explores how stellar programs such as This American Life (TAL) and Radiolab are influencing storytelling forms in Australia, which are moving away from artful, abstract writing through sound, made popular by European producers from the '60s, towards a more first-person, explicitly narrated format favoured by American producers. The study draws on qualitative in-depth interviews with key radio documentary and feature figures from both the US and Australia. It is a scoping study into the under-researched area of radio documentary, focusing on changing storytelling forms in an internationalised media landscape.*

## Introduction

When American radio host Ira Glass from *This American Life (TAL)* took his tour “Reinventing radio” to Australia at the beginning of 2012, he was met with sold-out performances and excited crowds. For such an inconspicuous medium as radio, this was an incredible achievement. His show has been broadcast on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s Radio National (RN) since 2011, but it is via podcasting that he has established an almost cult following. *TAL*, which is broadcast on US public radio, has 1.8 million listeners in the US, with an additional 850,000 listeners who download the show via podcast every week (*TAL*, 2013). Many of Glass’s listeners would be among the third of Americans who listen to podcasts. According to the Edison research study, *Podcast consumer 2012*, podcast listening in the US grew 163 per cent between 2006 and

2012. In 2006, 11 per cent of people listening to radio did so via podcast. By 2012, this figure had risen to 29 per cent (Webster, 2012). This revitalisation of listening audiences confounds doomsayers who have been predicting the demise of radio since the inception of television but, as Eric Nuzum, vice-president of NPR Programming in the US, declared in 2013: “Audio isn’t going away, it’s everywhere” (Duffy, 2013).

The growth of podcast listening means radio producers have the potential to reach an international audience, with podcasts automatically downloaded to a smartphone or computer for consumption anywhere and anytime. As such, it is no longer geography that defines an audience. Instead, types of stories and styles of programs attract certain demographics of listeners. As shown by McClung and Johnston in their 2010 study of podcast users, listeners are looking for good programs – or, in their words, entertainment – and the ability to control when they listen (2010, pp. 91-92).

The success of *TAL* and the subsequent Australian roadshow illustrates two important trends in radio: the reinvention of the radio documentary genre and the impact of a global reach of programs. Radio scholars Michelle Hilmes and Jason Loviglio (2013) argue that radio has achieved a new relevance as a result of a growing public and independent sector. And this renaissance has also revived formats, including radio features and documentaries (Loviglio & Hilmes, 2013, p. 3). In Australia, the number of people wanting to produce radio documentaries has grown dramatically since 2009.

This article explores trends in Australian and American radio documentary production and looks at whether the US renaissance in documentary and feature radio, exemplified by *TAL* and other successful radio and podcast programs, is starting to influence the genre in Australia. It draws on in-depth interviews with radio documentary and feature producers and editors from both the US and Australia. There is a dearth of research on the discipline of long-form radio. This study can be seen as a scoping exercise for future work looking at the changing nature of contemporary radio documentary in an internationalised media landscape.

## Literature review

Radio studies is a relatively new area of academic inquiry, and radio documentary studies even more so. Much of what has been written in the field is by radio producers themselves reflecting on their practice and by scholars focusing on significant producers and their radio productions. Foundational writing by early UK producers (McWhinnie, 1959; Sieveking, 1934) is often cited: pioneer drama producer Lance Sieveking at BBC Radio from the 1920s experimented with “radiogenic” methods while adapting literary classics for broadcast. BBC drama producer Donald McWhinnie suggested the idea of radio as theatre of the mind, not just asserting that radio is the equal of visual media such as theatre or film, but claiming that it is in some respects superior (McWhinnie, 1959, in Crisell, 2008, p. 36). Another influential radio producer whose work has attracted scholarly attention was the US “bard of radio”, Norman Corwin. His extensive output from the 1930s until his death in 2011 has been analysed because of the unusual combination of acute social commentary, poetic sensibility and inclusion of actuality in his radio essays, dramas and documentaries (Bannerman & Barnuow, 1986; Keith, 1998; 2008; Crook, 2012). The innovative *Radio ballads* made in the UK between 1958 and 1964 by Parker, MacColl and Seeger have been attributed with transforming radio feature production (Crook, 2012; Franklin, 2009; Howkins, 2000; McHugh, 2012, pp. 43-44; Street, 2004; 2012) by focusing on working-class people and other marginalised groups. British media studies academic David Hendy elegantly outlines key developments in British radio documentary from the 1940s (Hendy, 2004), further contextualised by UK scholars Crisell and Starkey in an overview of radio studies (Starkey & Crisell, 2009).

In Australia, radio scholar and former ABC producer Virginia Madsen has written essays that explore the radio documentary and other cultural radio traditions and practices in Europe, Australia and the US (Madsen, 2007; 2010; 2013). Award-winning Australian radio producer Tony Barrell's (1940-2011) work is covered in his own reflections (Barrell, 2006) and further analysed by producer and scholar Eurydice Aroney (2005; 2009), who also reflects on ethical and other dilemmas associated with telling a personal narrative (Aroney, 2008). The personal narrative/oral history framework for documentary is examined by Siobhan McHugh (2012) and by US documentary-maker Hardy in his essay on his collaboration with Italian oral historian Alessandro Portelli (Hardy, 1999).

More recently, the anthology *Reality radio: telling true stories in sound* (Biewen & Dilworth, 2010) invited celebrated radio documentary makers in the US, Canada, Australia and Europe to reflect on their practice and, in so doing, made a significant contribution to the field of radio documentary studies. Biewen's catholic approach to "the big stretchy tent that is radio documentary" includes essays by investigative journalists, poets, street artists and feature-makers in the European "acoustic film" tradition (Braun, 2004, p. 4), as well as activists and ethnographers. All they have in common is that "they use sound to tell true stories artfully" (Biewen & Dilworth, 2010, p. 5). The *Reality radio* anthology receives an in-depth critique by Timothy Crook in *The sound handbook* (Crook, 2012). Emeritus UK broadcasting academic Sean Street canvasses the poetics of radio and storytelling in sound in a wide-ranging book, *The poetry of radio* (Street, 2012).

In addition to the more traditional scholarly work mentioned above, there are a number of broadcasts, websites and podcasts critiquing the radio documentary form. Among the most significant are Transom, Third Coast Audio, International Feature Conference and How Sound. In the Alan Hall BBC production *The ballad of the radio feature* (Hall, 2008), accomplished European and Australian feature-makers reflect on their radio documentary output.

Finally, podcasting and its significant contribution to the longevity and dissemination of the radio documentary/feature form since its emergence in 2005 is examined by Madsen and Potts (2010). McClung and Johnston (2010) examine why listeners download podcasts and the social aspect of talking about and sharing the content of media with friends.

## **Methodology**

The research involved in-depth interviews with three radio producers and editors in an exploration study (Yin, 2003, p. 6), using a qualitative methods approach (see, for example, Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Seale, 2004; and Kvale, 1996, for discussions on in-depth interviewing). The number of interviewees in this study is small. This, however, does not weaken the results for a scoping study highlighting emerging trends in radio documentary forms, as the participants are significant figures in the international field and have influential and decision-making roles as executive producer and director in their respective organisations. Weerakkody (2009, p. 28) explains how in-depth interviews with a small number of participants can give important insights from within that group.

The participants represent two different radio cultures and organisations in Australia and the US. The case studies presented in this paper consider public service broadcasters (or "public radio", as it is called in the US). The US examples are selected specifically to contextualise and inform a discussion about radio documentary production in Australia. The US interviewees engage with influential radio programs with a large international audience. The Australian case study is explored through a focus on the ABC RN's flagship documentary program, *360Documentaries*.

## Radio documentary and journalism

Long-form radio stories are described as features or documentaries. These two forms are sometimes distinguished by level of truth, but the terms are often used interchangeably. The documentary can be described as wholly factual, telling stories of “real life” through interviews and written records (Lindgren, 2011), whereas the feature can hold the “many forms of radio: poetry, music, voices, sounds” (McLeish, 2005, p. 274). Another way of thinking about it is by conceptualising documentaries as being closer to journalism and features nearer to sound art, although this is a simplified divide, as documentaries can include elements of art and features can provide analysis. In the seminal book *Reality radio*, some of the radio documentarians contributing to the text describe themselves as storytellers, while others define their role as journalist (Biewen & Dilworth, 2010, p. 4). Another example is Kirsti Melville, presenter and producer of RN’s *360Documentaries*, who won the 2013 WA Journalist of the Year for her radio documentary series “Red Dirt Dreaming” (Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, 2013). The terms “radio documentary” vs “radio feature” can also be culturally specific. Biewen and Dilworth point out that the word “feature” is used in Canada, Australia and Europe to describe a “boldly artistic” radio genre (Biewen & Dilworth, 2010, p. 10). Street calls the feature a “hybrid between documentary and drama” (2012, p. 4). The two definitions are often used interchangeably and, as Chignell (2009, p. 22) points out, even though the two forms can be seen as separate genres, the many similarities make it possible to consider them as one. For that reason, this study adopts the term “radio documentary”. What both forms share is an authorial shaping by the producer to create meaning through *sound* as well as information: in long-form audio, juxtaposition, layering and selection of a program’s components (voice, music, actuality) are all significant factors (McHugh, 2012, pp. 40-41). Length of a long-form radio documentary itself is a critical aspect. As Hendy notes, “time ... is the strongest tool in the documentary-maker’s kitbag” (2004, p. 235). Unlike a two-minute news story, a 30 or 55-minute program allows the producer to develop a contributor’s character and to subtly unfold a story, in what BBC editors describe as informing “by stealth” (BBC, 1998).

## US public radio and the documentary form

In the US, two of the most popular of the new wave of radio storytelling platforms, *Radiolab* and *TAL*, use signature sound design, albeit in very different ways. *Radiolab* is renowned for micro-produced, fast-paced stories loosely related to science, culture and philosophy, punctuated with highly layered slivers of voice and acoustics. *TAL* often favours the first-person narrator, deriving its audience appeal from vernacular writing about real-life conundrums and whimsy crafted as a classic three-act theatrical model with a tightly scripted spontaneous feel. Presenter Ira Glass rejects the term “documentary”:

We made a conscious choice when we started *This American Life* that although it’s a documentary show, we’d never call it that, and in fact we’d avoid the word whenever possible, because “documentary” sounds like it’s going to be boring. Heavy. Not entertaining. Even I hold my breath a little before tuning in to a documentary program, and I make documentaries for a living. (Glass, 2011)

Both shows deliberately eschew an authoritative style, not just rejecting the old-fashioned “Voice of God” narrator, but actively including glitches and preambles in an effort to, as *Radiolab* co-presenter Jay Abumrad reflects, “create a sense of transparency ... It’s consciously letting people see outside the frame” (Walker, 2011). *Radiolab*’s seductive blend of seeming rawness and intricate production attracts a similar level of devotion to *TAL*: the show has a million live listeners, 1.8 million podcasters and also enjoys sell-out live stage shows (Walker, 2011). As Julie Shapiro, artistic director of the celebrated Third Coast Audio Festival in Chicago, notes:

They have a curiosity that translates to listeners, they tell the stories – *Radiolab* especially – in very unique, innovative ways. They’re playful ... they challenge what you’re used to hearing on public radio, how you’re used to hearing scientific topics, complicated things, talked about ... But at the heart of it is skill, chemistry, and a little bit of magic really. (Shapiro, 2011)

Although the stars of *Radiolab* (Jay Abumrad and Robert Krulwich) and *TAL* (Ira Glass) are hailed for revitalising the form, they follow a strong tradition of innovative public radio journalism in the US. American public radio began relatively late – almost 50 years after the BBC and the first public radio stations in Australia were founded in the 1920s – and, from the outset, it wore its (bleeding) heart on its sleeve, according to founding director of programming at National Public Radio Bill Siemerling (1970).

The ethos of public broadcasting, and the challenge to develop an “aural aesthetic”, attracted fledgling broadcaster and theatre graduate Jay Allison in the mid-1970s. Three and a half decades later, he is hailed as the godfather of the US public radio documentary (Biewen & Dilworth, 2010, p. 13). Over those decades, Allison has been “a national producer, a local station founder, and an internet guy” (Allison, 2011a). He has won prestigious awards, flirted with television journalism and produced a radio version of a sell-out live storytelling event, *The moth* (Allison, n.d.), described by the sober *Wall Street Journal* as “New York’s hottest and hippest literary ticket”. But despite his multifarious interests, it is his radio documentary series that has brought him most acclaim. The scope is enormous, ranging from explorations of mental illness and a history of family relationships to in-depth portraits of artists, people with disabilities, war veterans, to early interactive undertakings such as the Lost and Found Sound project for NPR, co-curated with The Kitchen Sisters (Collaborators: Lost and Found, n.d.)

Allison was interviewed for this study in Woods Hole, Massachusetts, a small Cape Cod community where he has launched a community radio station and a seminal organisation, transom.org, which acts as a go-between for radio makers and mentors, publishing manifestos by esteemed and eclectic industry professionals on the art and practice of radio, and running intensive training workshops for aspiring producers (transom.org, n.d.). The latter come from diverse backgrounds, and may not even end up making radio. Allison is unconcerned, convinced that the storytelling skills they acquire can be used to good effect regardless of their career choice.

Anybody, any organisation, needs to understand how to tell stories and how to listen to stories ... most people are very ineffective at explaining and making things intriguing and making others want to listen and taking the time to listen to people so that they speak truthfully. If you worked in social services, in theatre, in business – it doesn’t matter, those skills are important. (Allison, 2011b)

Besides his solo productions, Allison has collaborated with or nurtured hundreds of radio makers. His *Life stories collection* (2001) facilitated non-professionals to create their own first-person narratives – an approach that gained acclaim following David Isay’s *Ghetto life 101* (1993), and continues today via series such as Joe Richman’s *Radio diaries*. While he has engaged with vast themes and national audiences, with his work aired on 16 episodes of *TAL*, Allison also believes in letting radio do what it does best: capture intimate personal moments that connect our common humanity.

Another important influence on the development of the radio documentary genre internationally is the Third Coast Audio organisation. The online library at Third Coast hosts almost 1500 audio stories, catalogued with brief descriptions, sorted via length, theme and standing in the annual Third Coast Audio competition, and freely available for listening. Every alternate year, Third Coast hosts a conference that brings together top industry professionals, independent producers and enthusiasts from around the world. Third Coast can be described as a crossover zone between

audio art and radio journalism. Shapiro believes the “built” radio form that is the documentary is currently “in its heyday”, because podcasting and internet streaming have conferred accessibility and longevity on what was once an evanescent form:

You can go back and hear the whole back catalogue once you discover it. All that hard work that goes into the tiny little minute production decisions, can actually be appreciated, time and time again. More educators are bringing radio into classrooms, that’s helping younger people get involved: there’s a whole perfect storm of these things happening. (Shapiro, 2011)

The current heightened interest in the form has much to do with new, globalised ways of listening to radio. The significance of these impacts on radio production in Australia will be considered in the next section.

## Australia

Although some networked long-form radio, such as *All the best*, can be heard on community radio in Australia, the radio documentary style is predominantly found on public service radio. Australian radio documentaries are played on a number of different programs on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s Radio National, for example, *Hindsight* and *Into the music*. For this study, the focus was on the *360Documentaries* program (53-minute duration) which started in 2009 with Claudia Taranto as executive producer. She has 25 years’ experience in radio. The program was created when the radio documentary and feature showcase *RadioEye* was merged with *StreetStories*. It employs three full-time and two part-time producers, and has access to one sound engineer from a production pool. Each producer makes seven documentaries per year for *360Documentaries* and other long-form programs on Radio National. They have almost 100,000 listeners a week, plus 10,000 podcast downloads (Taranto, 2013a). The program has won a number of national and international awards since its inception.

With the notable exception of Colin Simpson’s landmark 1948 *Australian walkabout* series, most early long-form Australian radio documentaries were scripted, with actors recreating the voices and no recorded sounds or interviews (Madsen, 2009). The then head of ABC Radio Drama and Features, Richard Connolly, spent six months in Europe in the early 1970s researching and listening to new forms of radio documentary developed for the European audience, which included recordings of “wild” on-location sounds in stereo (Connolly, 1982, quoted in Madsen, 2009). One of the beneficiaries of Connolly’s nurturing of “radiophonic” works was Kaye Mortley, an Australian producer now based in France, whose “*filmes sonores*” or “radio films” since the mid-1970s have had international influence. Mortley’s “auteur” documentaries are closer to radio arts than “reportage or journalism” (Madsen, 2009). This new European-driven style liberated producers from the confines of the radio studios and paved the way for the radio documentary genre of today, where on-location, actuality sound recordings and interviews are the staple diet. From the 1980s, units at ABC Radio National such as Talks and Social History developed a canon of radio documentary that combined in-depth journalistic exploration with engaging and creative production techniques, to maximise what veteran producer Bill Bunbury calls “listenability”:

I’m interested in how the story will actually sound because I’m not doing it in a current affairs way where the important thing is the content. I’m doing it in what I call an affective way. If you make this distinction between cognitive and affective you certainly need to know the facts but you need to hear them in a way that moves you. (Bunbury, in Phillips & Lindgren, 2006, p. 89)

Bunbury and other RN producers (for example, Bowden and Davis) contributed groundbreaking explorations of Australian history and society. Producer Jane Ulman’s imaginative storytell-



ing straddled drama and documentaries, garnering five Prix Italias, while Robyn Ravlich's *oeuvre* was poetic and revelatory, covering themes ranging from ethno-nationalism and war to arts and culture. Legendary radio producer Tony Barrell, who spent almost four decades at the ABC from the 1970s, also influenced the Australian radio documentary style. In an interview with scholar and practitioner Eurydice Aroney, Barrell described his style of radio as "hybrid" feature:

[M]y work was a mix of what I thought to be a piece of artistic freewheeling self expression-based acoustic art pieces and the kind of information or analysis feature one might expect from a public broadcaster. (Barrell, in Aroney, 2005, p. 400)

As with all creative forms, radio documentary production styles and forms have continuously evolved. The more straightforward, more traditional ways of telling stories (evidenced on ABC Radio National signature programs such as *Talking history*, from the 1980s, and its replacement, *Hindsight*, from the 1990s) gave way to a style more evocative in nature. Taranto describes programs that could explore multiple ideas by pulling together a collection of content "into a sort of collage", expecting listeners to make the connections (Taranto, 2013b) – an approach developed from the 1990s by Barrell and examined in his radio feature, *Must you see the joins* (ABC, 2000), for the now-defunct *The listening room*, which experimented with sound art.

The contemporary Australian style of radio documentary is described by Taranto as highly produced in terms of sound design and the "complexity of the sound mix" (Taranto, 2013b). It spans from artful radio features to journalistic documentaries. Sound plays an important role in the storytelling. Unlike their American and BBC counterparts (for example, BBC World Service), where producers might spend only a day or two mixing a program, the Australian radio producers spend a week or even sometimes two weeks creating the final sound mix. The target audience is Australian, so any global listening via podcasting or online is a bonus, according to Taranto (2013b). Recently Rob Walker, a technology writer and avid podcast listener from Yahoo News highlighted what he regards as the world's best podcasts in recognition that podcast subscription via iTunes has exceeded 1 billion (Walker, 2013). Alongside the podcast *TAL* and other US productions, he described the ABC's *360Documentaries* as "an excellent source of long-form radio nonfiction" (Walker, 2013).

There is growing interest in the radio documentary genre, illustrated in Australia by a steep increase in the number of people wanting to produce stories. Whereas five years ago, Taranto received one freelance pitch a week, these days she receives about one a day, of which only 15 stories are funded for commission every year (Taranto, 2013b). Another example of the revival of the genre is the increasing number of online sites dedicated to the form: for example, Transom; HowSound; PRX (Public Radio Exchange, an online marketing centre for independent radio documentaries); and in production, collective listening (and Facebook) groups such as the Australian Radio Collective, which started in Melbourne in 2012, followed by the South Australian Radio Collective in Adelaide.

Many freelancers are young people who bring in new ideas, contacts and skills as storytellers – they include writers and filmmakers. The commissioned freelancers work under supervision of staff at RN. Taranto has seen how the new breed of freelancers is slowly changing the types of stories told on Australian radio (Taranto, 2013b). Many of them come to radio after listening to *This American Life*. Taranto describes the American storytelling technique as highly narrator-driven, "holding the listener's hand and making sure that they know exactly where they are", with short interview segments cut in and little attention to sound design (2013b). This is the radio documentary style that many Australian freelancers want to emulate:

[I]f we want to capture that younger audience who have become enamoured of that form, the American form, then we've got to take that on board and incorporate it in some ways into our storytelling as well. (Taranto, 2013b)

The heavily scripted, spoken-narrator style privileged by American radio producers is increasingly being favoured in Australia. Taranto says there is some “resistance to that amongst the producers here, but I think that that’s an important thing we have to do if we want to get that younger audience” (Taranto, 2013b).

There are other signals of new directions at ABC Radio National: for example, the axing of RN’s program *The night air* in early 2013, the abolition of the Drama Unit and the redundancy of documentary staff. A 2012 “Radio Beyond Radio” (RBR) Conference hosted at Radio National presaged the changes. It featured workshops with Francesca Panetta, a former BBC features producer who now heads multimedia content for *The Guardian*; Silvain Gire, co-founder of the innovative *Arte Radio*, which introduced podcasting in France in 2005; and Jonathan Mitchell, co-founder of *The Truth*, “a contemporary re-imagining of what audio drama is and could be” (The Truth podcast, 2013). RBR also featured presentations from a new wave of RN producers, among them Jaye Kranz, a writer, musician and producer who hosted the first live “Radio Hour” performance show at the 2012 Melbourne Writers’ Festival, and Melanie Tait, host of “a live true storytelling show”, *Now hear this*, the format of which closely resembles the US’s *The moth*. In March 2013, RN launched a new series, *Long story short*, which “shrinks the documentary format down to the everyday, showcasing remarkable real-life Australian stories and the best first person storytelling”. Its young hosts, multimedia producer and documentary maker Mike Williams and artist and independent producer Jesse Cox, covered a quirky range of topics, from a haunted house to bird enthusiasts, ageing rock stars and African immigrants overcoming prejudice on the soccer field. The style was casual; the stories’ length, at 5 to 14 minutes, designed for easy download. It is likely that this sort of format will become more prevalent on RN, with the newly established Creative Audio Unit currently advertising for producers who can work innovatively across “genres such as features, performance, music, documentaries” (ABC, 2013). Cox, whose production company Creative Nonfiction fits such a bill, won the Director’s Choice award at the 2013 Third Coast Audio Competition, perhaps a further indication of the gelling of the Australian and American “new documentary” landscape.

Radio scholar Kate Lacey describes radio in the digital age as “more prolific, more fragmented, more manipulable, more mobile, more global, more personal” (Lacey, 2013, p. 9). The American renaissance in radio has been positive for broadcasters such as RN, with a growing interest in the radio documentary form. But Taranto is unsure what this means for radio or whether the resurgence of long-form radio is sustainable, “largely because young people generally aren’t listening to radio and they’re not forming the habit of listening to radio” (Taranto, 2013b). Radio is today consumed on multiple platforms (Lacey, 2013, p. 9) and, like other media, it is shared via social media in bite-size forms. The shorter format is likely to impact on dominant Australian radio documentary styles because of how audiences are accessing media. McClung and Johnston (2010, p. 91) found in their 2010 study of podcast users that the social aspect of media was important: users (listeners) like to talk about what they have heard with their friends. In the era of Facebook and other social media, talking about and sharing stories is done online. For Taranto at ABC Radio National, this drives a trend towards shorter – and therefore more easily shareable – radio stories. If the audience is sitting in front of Facebook consuming short bits of content instead of listening to radio, then the program makers have to follow:

It’s a terrible shame in many ways, because it’s a completely different form, but having said that, you know, you can still do a lot of really good stuff in three minutes. (Taranto, 2013b)

In addition to pushing for shorter formats, social media platforms and audio technologies help drive collaborations with the audience. The experimental platform ABC Pool, which ran from 2008 to 2013, had over 8000 contributors producing over 25,779 works (ABC Pool, n.d.). Similarly, the ABC Open project invites people in regional communities to produce and publish text, photos, videos and audio through the ABC. At time of writing it had 45,073 contributions

(ABC Open, n.d.). This reflects the shifting nature of media production and listenership in the digital age. These shorter formats, new narrative styles and increased collaborations with listeners make for a different type of radio. Now even five-minute pieces can be described as radio documentaries, as illustrated by the 2-3 minutes stories in the ShortDoc radio competition established by Third Coast in 2003 and the 2013 competition PocketDocs run by *360Documentaries*, where the audience is invited to tell a story revealing a secret. The short stories (as written or presented in five-minute audio) are uploaded by the audience on the broadcaster's website. Taranto expects increased interaction and collaboration with the audience in future:

[W]e increasingly see ourselves as facilitating the voices and the stories of other people, rather than us being the people who sort of deliver the knowledge. (2013b)

## Conclusion

This scoping study has identified trends in radio documentary production in the US and Australia. It has noted a growing interest in the genre and a steep increase in the number of people wanting to produce radio documentaries in Australia. Already in 2003, Columbia University journalism professor Samuel G. Freeman stated, "we are living in the golden age of radio documentary" (2003). This development has been further assisted by podcasting and online access to what can be called a global smorgasbord of content. The study notes how Australian radio documentaries are becoming influenced by the distinctive American style of programs such as *This American Life* and *Radiolab*. That narrator-driven form is attractive to younger listeners and, when they get a chance to produce radio, it is their storytelling form of choice.

Increasing multiplatform listening is also having an impact on radio documentary production. Podcast listeners like "talking about the podcast content" (McClung & Johnston, 2010, p. 93) and with social media listeners can recommend and share radio stories, so that "shorter forms [of radio] are more likely to emerge at the expense of longer forms" (Taranto, 2013b). In addition to shorter formats, the involvement of listeners as contributors to and producers of radio is becoming more of a focus for broadcasters in Australia where, following the initiative set by Third Coast's popular ShortDocs competition, which attracted 240 entries in 2013, programs such as *360Documentaries* run projects where listeners can contribute content:

[W]e're fostering and nurturing people's creativity and then we curate the content at the end to produce a kind of coherent, I don't know if you even call it a documentary, but it's a collection of people's work. (Taranto, 2013b)

While this steadily growing interest in the radio documentary form is a positive development for the industry, there are questions about the long-term impact on radio broadcasters, especially if young listeners are not forming habits of listening to the radio. The implications of the renaissance in long-form radio exemplified by *TAL* and *Radiolab*, and the globalised context in which it occurs, are still in play both internationally and in Australia. This article has teased out some of the impacts to date. This scoping study has highlighted the potential for further studies into the under-researched genre of radio documentary, especially in a changing media landscape.

## Note

Tim Bowden's marathon series include *Taim bilong masta – the Australian involvement with Papua New Guinea* (ABC, 1981, 24x30mins) and *Prisoners-of-war: Australians under Nippon*

(ABC, 1984, 16x30mins). Bunbury's major works include *Unfinished business: an Australian republic* (ABC, 1997b) and *Timber of gold: the Kalgoorlie woodlines* (ABC, 1997a). Sharon Davis has made over 50 documentaries and won four Walkley Awards for Excellence in Journalism. Siobhan McHugh's series for the Social History Unit, *The Snowy – the people behind the power* (ABC, 1987, 6x30mins), featuring speakers of 25 nationalities, was the first ABC radio documentary to give predominance to "ethnic" voices on-air (Palmer, 1987).

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