



RADIO DOCUMENTARY

(Natalie Konyalian, Cyprus Community Media Centre)

What is a Radio Documentary?

Radio documentary is a spoken word, non-fiction radio format. It is broadcast on **radio** as well as distributed through media such as podcast. It covers a topic in depth through one or more perspectives, often featuring interviews, commentary, and sound pictures. Creating a good feature is about the art of shaping sound to tell a compelling story. Done well, it can provide intimate insights into somebody else's world, painting pictures in the minds of the listeners.

A feature can include original music compositions and creative sound design or can resemble traditional journalistic radio reporting.

- Recorded (i.e. not live broadcasting)
- No visuals – need to give the listener enough information to follow the story and to use their imagination whilst keeping their attention
- Gaining in popularity due to the flexibility, efficiency and accessibility to the masses
- A microphone creates a different quality of intimacy that a camera does not
- A microphone can also be less intrusive or intimidating than a camera, lights etc, i.e. people might be more inclined to agree to being interviewed for a radio documentary rather than on camera
- Editing process can take much less time and less 'hassle'
- Can work in smaller teams as opposed to television or film

Elements Used to Create a Radio Documentary

- Narration (voice over)
- Interviews
- Music
- Sound (SFX, ambient sound, anything that adds emotion or mood to the feature)

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Music and Silence

Once the structure is put together, think about what music is needed. Sometimes this takes longer than the rest of the documentary!

- The wrong music can ruin a documentary, so choose wisely!
- Silence can also be a powerful element to your documentary
- Avoid using music with lyrics

Tell a Good Story

What makes a story good? Surprise. Unusual elements. Topics you have proximity to, familiarity with, or at least a genuine interest in yourself. It's hard to tell a brand new story, but you can always tell an old story in a new way. Good stories bear repeated listens and get stuck in listeners' heads like favourite pop songs.

Listen Critically – and to a lot

Listen to a lot of different documentaries before you begin producing your own work. There are so many ways to tell stories – it's best to expose yourself to the variety. The Internet is full of radio documentaries, some examples are:

The Kitchen Sisters

This American Life

Radiolab.org

www.bbc.co.uk/radio/programmes/formats/documentaries/player

www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02nrscw/episodes/downloads

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Use Detail to Make Radio Visual

The best audio stories include details – in the narration or subtle or overt sounds – that give listeners the tools they need to imagine the pictures in their own heads. But you need to help your audience "see" the story you're telling and you can do this by acknowledging details as you craft your narrative. Add colour and emotion to your story via details. Let the sounds help you tell the story but remember music should always suggest, rather than dictate the mood you're attempting to create.

Small Can Be Big

In the beginning, try shorter pieces. You'll learn more from producing half a dozen shorts than an hour-long feature. Remember that the more time you spend in front of editing software, the better you'll get at the technical aspects. The more people you interview, the more comfortable you'll be approaching strangers. The more stories you tell, the more you'll learn about narrative structures and how to identify stories worth sharing in the first place.

How to Find a Story

It is important to find a story that is unique and based on everyday people. It could be something that's happened in your own life or to someone you know. Some of the best interviews you will ever do will be with ordinary people who have key things to say. Some of their narratives may be emotional, personal, revealing, tragic or even humorous. Look around you, talk to people, everyone has a story to tell.

Scripting

- To introduce and/or end an item or programme
- To link sections of a programme
- To convey information that is not available in recorded form, or which can be more logically conveyed by a narrator
- To introduce mood or feeling into a programme, or to set a scene
- The disadvantage of not scripting is that you may miss something or not know whether or not something will make sense or fit during the editing phase.

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Structuring

As with fiction, it is important to structure your documentary with a beginning, a middle and an end, i.e. a narrative arc. As a producer, you are going on a journey while you are making your documentary.

Sometimes it's not always ideal to pre-interview your characters (particularly if you are not recording them at this stage), as they may say things that they may not repeat in the recording, or have an emotion about their topic that they cannot repeat. This may also break the spontaneity or mystery of your story.

On the other hand, it is good practice to chat with your interviewees before the official interview to give them a sense of what topics you will cover and get any additional information you may need.

You may want to gather your information in the order of the documentary to keep its authenticity. Of course, this depends on availability of your interviewees.

Find your own style. It may be trial and error. And remember, making a documentary requires flexibility. Your story may change as you are going along, and you may come across hurdles along the way. For example, you may need to find new characters to interview, which may change the script or structure of your documentary.

Planning

Pre-recording: go into it with a basic plan – you must have a reasonably clear idea of what you are about to do. In the straight factual type of programme it is fairly easy. Ask yourself the following questions:

1. What is the present situation?
2. How has it come about?

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3. What will happen if it isn't remedied?
4. What steps are being taken?
5. Who is taking them?
6. When can we see a change?
7. What is that likely change to be?

I.e. the 'who', 'what', 'when', 'where' questions

Interviewing Techniques

Spend time with your interviewee.

Make them feel comfortable.

Sometimes being in the studio doesn't work. Go to them, be in their own environment.

Interviewing Checklist – What to Take with You

- Audio recorder **OR**
- Smart phone (make sure you have plenty of battery and memory space, and don't forget to switch to airplane mode to avoid interruptions!)
- Spare batteries
- Spare memory cards
- Microphone
- Headphones/earphones
- Spare cables (if necessary)
- Notepad and pen
-

Always test your equipment before arriving at your interview. Also do a quick test with your interviewee before you begin recording

Things to Consider During the Interview:

- Choose a comfortable and quiet place to conduct your interview

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- Pay attention to and surrounding sounds. Even the quietest room may have an interfering noise in the background, which we may not notice until after we have finished the recording. E.g. AC units, fridge, squeaky chair, traffic outside etc)
- Always wear headphones to monitor your sound
- Always check your batteries and memory space before arriving
- Make eye contact with your interviewee to show that you are listening and interested in what they are saying
- Offer your interviewee a glass of water before you begin
- If the topic being discussed is sensitive and your interviewee gets emotional, take a break and give them a few minutes until they are ready to continue. Make sure the sentence where they begin flows with the previous one.

Post-recording:

1. Listen through to what you've recorded. Roughly cut out the pieces you plan to use and name them. You should not have hugely more sound than the length of your programme (although how much room you plan to leave for script very much depends what kind of programme you are making).
2. Create a document (word, notepad, a notebook) and note the cuts in it.
3. Jot down the main areas to be covered in the programme. (i.e. make a paper list of what should be covered)
4. Look through the list, and place these areas in a logical order.

Exercises

Free Writing: Spend the next 10 minutes writing ideas for your story. If you have a topic in mind, write it at the top of your page and then jot down anything related to your topic, using whichever method you like (bullet points, graphics etc). If you don't have a topic in mind, then write down every random thought that crosses your mind as quickly as possible. If you run out of things to write, keep writing the same word or phrase over and over again until something else pops into your mind. When the time has run out, look over what you have written and circle or underline idea that you like or think that might be useful for your documentary.

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Brainstorming: Split into groups of three or four and discuss the ideas or topics you came up with in the previous exercise. Choose one or two topics between you that you agree on, and start brainstorming on how you can further develop it.

Scripting on Paper: Based on the topic/s you have chosen, do a draft script/structure of your radio documentary, thinking about the sequence in which you will edit your audio. Think about the type of music or SFX you will use and add them to your timeline. At this stage, you can prepare your questions and who you will interview.

Interviewing: In your groups, think of questions that you will ask/answer, based on the topic/s you have chosen. Take turns to interview each other, taking into consideration the technical aspects discussed.

Find out more about the project: <http://frauensolidaritaet.org/erasmusplus>

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