

Interview 1: NPR reporter Hannah Allam discusses her journey from print to audio

[00:00:00] So this week, we're taking a look at what makes a good audio story, and when you're writing or reporting a story, there are some things you really do a bit differently if you're writing a print piece, producing an audio story, making a video, or trying to do some combination of the three. To dive into some of the differences between writing a story meant to be read versus one meant to be told, Hannah Allam joins us. She's a colleague of mine at NPR. She's a national security correspondent focusing on American extremism. Hannah, thank you so much for joining us today.

[00:00:29] Hi. Glad to be here.

[00:00:31] So before you came to NPR, you were at BuzzFeed, and before that, you were the Baghdad bureau chief for McClatchy newspapers. Tell me about why you decided to make the move from a career writing stories for people to read to joining NPR and really learning how to tell audio stories.

[00:00:46] I'm kind of an accidental radio journalist. I was at BuzzFeed, and then I actually got laid off in that bloody week for digital media, where over a thousand jobs were lost in the industry. And as I'm kind of picking up the pieces and trying to figure out what to do next, I had two offers. One was a traditional sort of newspaper role, and then I was talking to NPR about what eventually became this role. And I think it would have been comfortable and safe to go with a newspaper job, but I thought, you know, how often does this chance come around where you can actually sort of remake yourself as a journalist? And you've done it 20 years one way, go challenge yourself and do something new. Try something else. So there are many days when I'm like, "What was I thinking?" But overall, it's been absolutely the challenge of a career. It's absolutely fascinating. It's flipped how I think about storytelling. It's ruined how I listen to NPR because now I listen forensically to, "Oh, I love what they did with sound there." But, you know, it's very much a transition. So I definitely don't want to say I've learned everything, and here, you know, here is my story. It is every day there's a term, or a technique, or something that I'm learning, and it's kind of scary. You know, how much I don't know what I don't know. So that part is thrilling. It's fun. It's exciting. It's scary. All of that stuff. So I'm glad to have tried it.

[00:02:21] So tell me a little bit about some of the biggest changes you've experienced and how you've had to approach the stories you cover, knowing that you're doing an audio version now and maybe sometimes even a digital text version as well?

[00:02:32] Well, I think one of the cool things about working for a multimedia company like NPR is that you have a bigger toolbox. Not everything has to be, you know, you have to do this digital story and you have to do the exact same story for audio. So I think it's really fun to find this great story. You take the best sound rich parts of it, and you put that on the air. But maybe there's, you know, a spin-off story or maybe there's a part that wasn't exactly great for radio but that you think is worth exploring, and you can do that in a companion piece, a digital piece. And so I really try not to make my digital stories these sort of newspaper-ification, a version of, you know, a radio story. I hear some of my colleagues who come from the opposite background, radio, and now they're sort of, you know, being asked to do digital, grumbling in the opposite direction. And I'm, you know, I'm still very much new to radio, and I think that part is really cool. But I love the fact that I can still do digital. And in fact, you know, as the numbers show in this pandemic and with the kind of flipping of our audience, where we have this giant digital audience all of a sudden where we once had this massive radio audience. Ideally, we'll come out of this with both.

[00:03:51] Well, let's get into the nitty-gritty. What are some of the things that you really see yourself doing differently in terms of craft and, you know, writing and story structure? What's changed for you?

[00:04:02] Yeah, I think the biggest lesson has been learning to write for sound. To write to sound, rather. That, you know, to think about a story when you have that story idea. It's not just, you know, "OK, now I make my source list. Who are the people I want to talk to? What are the reports I'm going to pull?" You know, it's also there are all these other considerations. Is this person that

I'm going to call a good talker? So now I take an extra step, and I might, you know, look at YouTube videos of that person and hear how they present themselves and present arguments because I know I'm going to have 30 seconds. You know, is that a source who can make the point in that succinct way. And I think also, even before going out to a scene... This is tip they give in your orientation at NPR is, you know, thinking already, anticipating the sound that you're going to hear so that you arrive, and you get the gravel crunching under the foot of the person coming out to greet you. You get that initial, "Hello, welcome to wherever we are." You know, that is so useful in setting a scene. And so I guess it all comes back to really scenes and knowing that you can't paint this three-dimensional picture. You know, like in print you can describe the sounds and the smells, but so much of it is just sound in radio. And you're competing with somebody who's, you know, I imagine a listener standing at the kitchen sink, and washing their dishes, and talking to their kids. You have to have these gripping scenes that take people there with you, and that's a real challenge, especially on national security beat, where we don't always have sources willing to talk openly with their names, much less voices or, you know, titles. And so it becomes even more of a challenge not to have what we call the old acts and tracks, which is what I was familiar and comfortable with from journalism. You write a block of text, you add a spicy quote. And so learning the art and the craft of radio storytelling has been thrilling. We can break up those texts, those blocks of quotes. You can find interesting ways to introduce sound, archival sound, natural sound, just this whole smorgasbord of tools out there. That's been really cool.

[00:06:40] I would say the single best piece of advice I've gotten. I mean all the nuts-and-bolts training stuff at NPR has been great. But when I finally accepted the job, I thought, "Oh, my gosh, what have I gotten myself into? And I don't know how to do radio. Where do I even start?" And so I called up an old friend of mine. She's been my friend for 20 years. Tara Gatewood, she is the host of Native America Calling, and just a wonderful, legendary journalist in Indian Country. And so she's down in New Mexico, and I said, "Tara, how do you do this? What am I going to do?" And she said, "You know, the best radio storytelling, the storytelling has to come from your sources, from your subjects. And you should just think of yourself as that whisper, connecting their ideas and nudging the listener along. And you shouldn't drown them out. You shouldn't be too much in the forefront. It's not about you and your voice, like you're facilitating these voices." And I just thought that was a great way of thinking about it. Now that I look at it and study it kind of forensically, these radio stories, I do see that the best and most sort of impactful stories are the ones where the reporter not doing a lot of the work. Well, they are actually, as you learn from being behind the scenes. It's an awful lot of work to make it look like it's not a lot of work. But to really just step back and let those voices shine and try to make your links, you know, just as subtle and as short as possible.

[00:08:19] And in those links in the places in a radio script where, you know, you're actually doing the writing and it's going to be your voice, what has had to change about your actual writing? I mean, you spent a lot of your career, you know, being a writer and working with words and paragraphs and sentences and, you know, formulating your ideas that way. What had to change to make it work well to be heard?

[00:08:39] Yeah, I mean I was lucky that between newspapers, traditional legacy newspapers and NPR, I had this pitstop at BuzzFeed where for two years I worked in this really interesting, sort of revolutionary newsroom, where they dispensed with kind of the journalese, and there was a focus on making your writing just vernacular. Why do we say somebody grappled with something? You know, all of those like three-dollar words that we turn to in newspapers. And so I thought that was a really great stepping stone for radio writing, which is conversational. It's storytelling. Nobody wants to sit and listen to you spew jargon. You're in the service of the listener. You're trying to make things as easy to understand as possible, and I really like that. I love that you don't have to be as formal, that you can just say things. The other way that this has changed my writing is that, you know, I'm used to really long-form pieces, kind of magazine style. And obviously, you know, that's rare in print, and on radio we're talking 3.5 or 4.5 minutes. Once in a while, we'll have 7- or 8-minute pieces. But so sometimes you want to convey something and you don't have the words or the time, and so you learn to do that with your voice, you know?

[00:10:12] She turned the corner expecting him to be there. But that's not what happened. You know, you learn to. And so at first, there was a kind of, I don't know, performer sort of aspect to it. Oof that's uncomfortable. Still, on many days, I find it uncomfortable, but I just think back to,

"Who is it in the service of?" It's in the service of your listener. They might miss that nuance if you don't convey it with your voice, convey it with your words. The important part is imparting the message and the story. And so, yeah, there's different ways to do that, and there is a necessary sort of performer aspect of radio that can help.

[00:10:57] How did you teach yourself or learn to, you know, kind of deal with the fact that our ears, in some ways, are a lot slower in taking in information, on one hand, than reading? Like reading, we can quickly absorb a lot of numbers, a lot of very dense facts, and our ear, while it can get a lot of nuance about emotion and all of that sort of thing, we don't take in facts all that quickly. And in a lot of radio writing, it's kind of one idea per sentence. And, you know, when you're writing for a paper or, you know, a novel, there's a lot that happens in every sentence. What did you do to kind of have to change your writing style and learn how to do that?

[00:11:33] That was a big lesson to learn, honestly. And back when we were working in our lovely building in the capital, I sat next to our Pentagon reporter, my colleague on the national security team, Greg Myre. And one day I just got kind of frustrated with that. I was trying to pack all these ideas into this short script, and I said, "Greg, you write for the New York Times and elsewhere before. I mean, what's the secret to this?" And so now I think of it as Greg's Rule Of Three. And so it's, you know, three ideas per story. You have got to land the first one. You're going to try to land the second one. And if you can get a listener to take away a third idea, wow, wow, that's great. That's amazing. That's a home run. So when he put it like that, you really do see. I mean, I think of my own listening habits. I'm like, "Wait a minute. What was that character? Who is that? What are they talking about? Is this a different group?" You know, so I do try to think of that. This happens. This is who's involved. This is what it means. You know, just really clear takeaways. And that's where sometimes I really do love having that digital piece. I often find myself with my editors in edits where he's like, "Can we cut this? You know, we don't really have time." And it's a tough cut, and I want to keep it in. And then I find myself saying, "I can put it in the digital." So that's my sort of repository.

[00:13:03] Curious, though, are there stories you really think about differently? When you're going into cover them, you know, knowing you're doing audio versus your days during print? You know, you've covered wars. You cover a lot of protests. And these are a lot of situations where, you know, your safety really isn't always a given, and I'm curious what additional challenges there are, working with audio, you know, when you're in what's a so-called hostile environment? Does that kind of up the stakes at all for you?

[00:13:30] Yes, it does. I think my entire time as a reporter covering conflicts overseas, actual wars on a large scale, I didn't have equipment. It was a notebook, maybe a tiny recorder or just my phone used as a recorder. But by and large, I just slipped sort of in and out of places. I could listen to things. And so you soak up a lot more, I feel. And then there is a difference in how you're perceived, and how you're treated, and how sources react when you show up with headphones, and a big mic, and a big gear bag. And, you know, just from a standpoint of security and physicality, it's hard to run with that stuff. It's hard to listen for threats. So I'll keep one ear out and keep my headphones slid to the side so that I can hear if somebody is coming from behind me. So a lot is going on simultaneously. You're checking your levels. You're trying to get the mic positioned. You're also in a pandemic, so you don't want to get too close. So then, you know, all these things swirling around. So just that kind of conspicuousness of it. Although I will say now that, I mean, it kind of doesn't even matter. I mean, journalists are targeted. You could be targeted for half a dozen reasons when you show up to one of these things. I do think, you know, with all the radio gear, you show up, and it's like, "Hi, I'm a reporter." There's just no way around it. There's no going undercover. But also, there just really isn't any way to hide that these days. There are people throughout these crowds to sort of make you. You know, is that a protester, or is that an undercover police, or is that a reporter? And so, you know, there's just all these eyes on you. But I think that it's been great because NPR has been really supportive of that. They know that it's best to send teams, so someone is kind of watching your back if you have tunnel vision with the headphones on trying to get this interview done. Somebody is kind of looking around and making sure nobody's walking up to you with a baseball bat or something. It can be scary. And then, I mean, people did tell me...Because I thought "Nobody is going to want to talk to me. It's gonna be so awkward having this big thing shoved in their face." And in the year and few months that I've been at NPR, I've actually only had one militia guy actually hit it and say, "Get this thing

out of my face." What my colleagues told me would happen has largely happened. People eventually forget it's there, and you build a rapport. And it's really kind of up to you to break through that awkwardness.

[00:16:19] And the other thing is when you're at protests and in some of these really volatile scenes, there are always people who want to talk as well. Sometimes it's a good thing. People see you, and they're like, "That's the press." And then the last weird thing about that is that, I don't know, because I know newspapers have a different kind of audience, and so, you know, ain't no fans like NPR fans. So I have been out at a protest in I think Seattle, and I've had people come up and want to take selfies with me because I see NPR things. So that was one I never saw coming. And so there is just that, like, you know, it's nice when that happens. And then people see you as NPR and want to help you, and say, "Have you seen this? You should introduce this. Oh, my gosh, we're so glad you're here." But yeah, there are pluses and minuses for sure.

[00:17:15] So what do you think the journalism you do, you know, what has been gained by you now, working in audio and being able to have that sort of storytelling? And, you know, are there things you feel like you've lost as you've moved over to audio? You know, it's kind of in that pro-con tradeoff.

[00:17:29] Yeah, I don't think there's much that I've lost only because now there is this focus on digital, and the digital numbers are doing great. There is an audience. I just think it goes back to storytelling. You tell a good story in whatever form, and people are going to read it. I think that the most vivid and beautiful and graceful and lyrical writing...I don't know, there's still not...there's not that voice. It's still a filter. And so I really do love the immediacy and intimacy of radio and having people that you can hear the accents, the emotion, the inflections. You know, that when their voice catches or when they're overcome or whatever, and it's just that those are moments that are really very hard to capture in words. And so I just find that kind of storytelling rich. And also the layering of sound. So you can take even kind of a straightforward story, but with layers of sound and natural sound or archival, it's just it becomes a different kind of story. I think that's really cool.

[00:18:45] So I'd love to get any advice that you have. The students in this class are obviously interested in audio storytelling and really thinking about why it's something that really has had a resurgence, and where it's going as technology changes. What advice do you have? What do you wish somebody had told you? What would you want to pay forward?

[00:19:04] Appreciating the technical aspects of it. It's not, you know, flipping a switch, pressing record, and the magic happens. I mean, you have to really care about sound. You have to add the clarity of sound, the quality of it, the natural sound you're gathering. If you're not interested in that and if it doesn't gel, I just think it's a really hard road to travel in radio. I'm interested in it, and it's still fascinating to me because I'm still learning. And I actually like that challenge of it. But I think, I wish I'd known, really, it is hard. It's hard. Like, I used to think after covering the State Department, we'd go on some big trip with Secretary Kerry, and, you know, Michele Kelemen cover State Department would just do her piece and she's done. And I'm you know, meanwhile, typing for what feels like the rest of my natural life. And she's done. And we're on the same trip. And I used to think like, "Oh, gosh, those radio reporters have it so easy." And now that I'm in that position and have too often on the fly, you know, create something concise, factual, newsy in a very short time based on an official statement, it's actually almost harder than getting to sit down and write out everything. So, I have a new appreciation for what goes into even a 40-second spot on newscasts. That's become my sort of favorite area where you can play around. Like, how much storytelling can I do in 40 seconds? That's, to me, an interesting challenge.

[00:20:55] So, I mean, to the students. One of the things that I did when I was even being considered for this job was I went into one of the interviews with a hiring editor, and I said, "You know, I've looked at my stories, my favorite three stories from the past year. They were digital stories, newspaper stories." And I said, "I tried to think of how they...what I would have done differently as an audio story, and here's what I would have done." Try and pitch them kind of that way. In some cases, they were very different. The last thing I would say is don't get discouraged. It is hard. I think there is a lot...way too many podcasts, probably, out there. There are a lot of podcasts out there. Not everybody needs to make a podcast, but, somehow get that experience. You know, maybe apprentice yourself to a radio journalist if you can, try to listen forensically to

the podcasts you do like, to the radio programs that you like, and listen. Where did they introduce the sound? What sound is running underneath this script? How is the reporter using her voice in this? You know, all those different ways of just kind of almost picking apart a story to look at its parts and see how it came together, that's been enormously helpful for me. And then on the not just getting discouraged part. I called another friend of mine, Natalie Moore from WBEZ, a friend of mine since college and fabulous radio journalist and storyteller. I said, "I don't know if I can do this. It's not might not be for me." And she told me the story of how when she was transitioning from newspapers, it was the Obama inauguration. And she said, you know, she fought so hard to get them to send her to cover the inauguration. So she finds herself out there on the Washington Mall and all these people, and she realizes she doesn't know how to work this equipment. She's not sure what to do. And she said, "I had you know, I had this meltdown, and you just have to figure it out on the fly." And so those moments can be so daunting and terrifying. I've been, you know, kind of looking over my shoulder, wondering if I'm going to be tapped for hurricane coverage for that very reason, because, I mean, that's a different kind of learning experience. But I've found in both print actually and radio that there's nothing like just doing it. And for all Natalie's... You know, she said for all her heartache and what a hard day it was there, in the end, she filed something. It went on the air, and she learned so much, and she got to be there to cover that moment. So, you know, you have to do it. You have to just get out in the field and do it as much as you can. And with each story, I feel I've learned something. I've learned a new skill. So for a newbie, it can be a lot, but it's also not the same kind of journalism I've done for 20 years. It's totally different, so it's cool and good to learn.

[00:24:10] Well, thank you so much for joining us and sharing your advice, and sharing your expertise, and your experience making that transition. I think it's really helpful to hear from someone who's had to grapple, you know, starting to use a very printy word, grapple with some of that transition. So really appreciate your time, Hannah. Thank you.

[00:24:26] Thank you. It's a work in progress, but I appreciate it. Thank you.

[00:24:31] If you want to read any of Hannah's digital pieces or listen to any of her audio, you can find it at NPR.org. Thanks.