

THE END OF THE DIAL

Date/Time TBD, Room ???

Professor Derek L. John

Office hours: TBD, Room ???

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Course Description

As the opportunities for quality journalism continue to dwindle, budding reporters will need every tool at their disposal to find meaningful work. THE END OF THE DIAL offers a solid introduction to several of these tools with an eye (and ear) toward complementing traditional coursework. As you'll discover, sound has limitless opportunities for storytelling. It's one of the most compelling media for conveying information and analysis with nuance and intimacy – the “theater of the mind,” as the hoary-but-true old saying goes. Furthermore, as the audiences for “old media” organs and programs shrink, radio – that is, public radio, with its 32 million listeners – thrives and grows. Few media outlets prize in-depth news and cultural coverage as much as NPR and PRI. Fewer still have set aside so much airtime for freelancers.

And then there's the web: while the digital age is rendering much of old media obsolete, they aren't necessarily mutually exclusive. It's no accident that *The New York Times'* Multimedia division was recently honored with a Peabody Award. The podcasting boom has only just begun and for innovative creators of audio content, the new technologies represent nothing but opportunity. In short, audio storytelling is a valuable skill in a media landscape that increasingly favors ‘backpack journalism.’

Students will come to understand the differences and similarities between creating journalism to be heard and to be read. You'll learn how to interview and gather sound, and write, edit and produce your own stories and commentaries for radio and podcast. You'll learn how to write for the ear, and create narrative arcs and effective pacing. You'll learn how to use sound to help set scenes and tell a story. You'll learn how to ask good questions and pick good tape. You'll learn about sound design – that is, how to use music, ambient sound, and archival clips to enrich your pieces. You will discover that the properties of good radio can do wonders for your writing. Even as we learn industry conventions we'll be testing and questioning them, examining their rapid evolution as journalism moves in new directions.

In addition to guest lectures from luminaries in the field, the course will culminate with a visually enhanced collaboration with WNYC Radio's digital team. Weekly classes are split into two sections, with one period devoted to more intensive technical instruction. The idea is to let students reap the advantage of extra in-class editing and mix work to get the most out of their assignments. You will also be expected to use the school's resources (Edirol recorders & Pro Tools editing software) to work on your pieces outside of class.

Readings

John Biewen, [Reality Radio](#)

Jonathan Kern, [Sound Reporting: The NPR Guide to Audio Journalism and Production](#)

Edward R Murrow, [This is London \(Witnesses to War\)](#)

Walter Murch, [In the Blink of an Eye](#)

Other photocopied readings to be assigned throughout the semester along with lots of

listening.

Assignments

Beyond the readings, each student will be expected to select a meaningful excerpt of radio or audio documentary for in-class discussion over the course of the semester. You will have four main assignments during the duration of the course, the final assignment being a radio feature written and narrated by you, incorporating multiple voices. We'll begin the course with a simple Cut & Copy report on a breaking news story. Second, a single-voice commentary, written, voiced, and edited by you. Third, you'll have two options for producing a 3-4 minute non-narrated piece. Either a single-voiced piece in the format of an "Aha Moment," Studio 360's series on artistic inspiration. Or a classic NPR-style Audio Postcard conveying a strong sense of place. The final feature project will be the most complex and open-ended piece with room for experimentation and several rounds of revision. In collaboration with WNYC Radio's Digital team, students will create an online visual component for Assignment 3 or 4.

1. **Cut & Copy** – brief news spot with student reporter narrating around cut of tape; 1-2 minutes
2. **Commentary** - written and voiced by student; 3 minutes.
3. **Non-narrated** – two options to choose from, both 3-4 minutes:
 - a) "Aha Moment" – single-voice piece featuring story of artistic inspiration w/ rich sound design.
 - b) Audio Postcard - a piece heavy on audio that uses vox & ambi to convey a sense of place.
4. **Narrative Feature** - narrated with multiple voices, scene sound, & music scoring; 6-8 minutes.

All assignments must be submitted via MP3 and, if applicable, with a written script. You will need a 4GB or higher SD card for the Edirol recording kit, and a USB thumb drive for in-class playback.

Attendance and Grading

Full participation is expected in class, and attendance is crucial. (You'll be learning a lot in a short period.) This is a workshop-style class, which requires in-class listening and critiquing of your classmates' work. More than two absences will not be allowed. If you miss class you must notify me in advance, and you will still be responsible for completing all assignments. When we have listening assignments, you'll be expected to contribute to the discussion during class. Participation will be a big part of your grade. What the grades mean:

A = Professional quality; ready to show to an editor

B = On the right track but still missing a fundamental element; needs additional work

C and below = A serious liability stands between you and a broadcast-ready story; fixing will require a shift in approach or concept

You must file by deadline! Plagiarize or fabricate anything and you not only fail the class, but you will be subject to department sanctions that can include expulsion.

Syllabus

WEEK 1: From Griot to Murrow

-the singular power of aural storytelling

-why radio, why now? class overview

-listen to classic broadcasts from Murrow to Limbaugh to *This American Life*

-**tech**: Edirol recording equipment intro

-students interview each other for 5 minutes

-**assignment**: Gather tape for "Name that Sound" exercise

WEEK 2: Tale of the Tape

- what is sexy tape, how do you collect it?
- “Name that Sound” exercise
- Introduction to deadline news reporting & brainstorm Cut & Copy ideas
- tech**: ProTools intro: file management, creating sessions, tracks, etc; start basic editing
- assignment**: Cut & Copy first draft

WEEK 3: Cut & Copy

- playback/critique Cut & Copy
- discuss writing for the ear
- pitch Commentary ideas
- tech**: more Pro Tools practice
- assignment**: Commentary 1st drafts

WEEK 4: Commentary

- edit Commentary scripts; read to each other
- voicing exercise: how to read, how to take direction
- tech**: In-studio voice-over recording
- record Commentaries, start editing on ProTools
- assignment**: complete Commentary edit; pitch ideas for non-narrated piece

WEEK 5: Show Don't Tell

- playback/critique Commentaries
- intro to non-narrated stories
- interviewing techniques
- tech**: advanced instruction in field recording
- how to post-produce a 2-way interview: editing for content and sound; listen to examples
- assignment**: conduct interviews for non-narrated piece by next class

WEEK 6: Recording Non-narrated

- listen, critique non-narrated pieces
- how to produce a Studio 360-style “Aha Moment” or NPR Audio Postcard
- introduction to sound design
- guest**: veteran producer & sound artist Pejk Malinovski
- assignment**: Non-narrated mix due by next week

WEEK 7: Editing Non-narrated

- start logging, editing tape, bring ideas for sound design
- first rough mixes of non-narrated piece, in-class help w/ editing & mixing
- tech**: advanced instruction in Pro Tools
- assignment**: pitch final feature project ideas

WEEK 8: Sweetening the Mix

- playback/critique of non-narrated pieces
- fine-tuning your sound design
- finessing fades, effective pacing, and scoring with music
- assignment**: begin work on final project, Murch reading TBD

WEEK 9: Walter Murch & “The Conversation”

- watch excerpt of Murch’s “The Conversation” & discuss film vs. sound narrative
- pitch stories for final project (mock editorial meeting) and refine ideas before green light
- discuss NYT’s “One in 8 Million” multimedia series
- guest**: New York Times Multimedia guru Sarah Kramer
- assignment**: first paper draft due

WEEK 10: Feature workshop 1

- what makes a good radio story – arc, characters, driven by a question
- work on feature project – recording, logging and editing interviews
- assignment:** second paper draft due

WEEK 11: Feature workshop 2

- first draft scripts due; first edits in class
- work on feature project – refining script, crafting narrative
- start recording voiceovers
- assignment:** first mix due

WEEK 12: Feature workshop 3 & WNYC

- first mix due
- field trip to WNYC to meet Digital team
- real world practical applications for new radio skills
- preview of visually enhanced audio content for WNYC website
- guest:** WNYC Culture Editor Allison Lichter heads up the new digital web portal
- assignment:** final mix due

[Thanksgiving – NO CLASS]

WEEK 13: Audio/Visual Club

- first solid mixes of final projects due – listen and work on revisions
- how to create an audio slideshow -- introduction to Soundslides, iMovie, etc.
- how can visuals enhance audio storytelling? How can it be limiting?
- assignment:** final piece w/ visuals due

WEEK 14: The End of the Dial

- class listen and critiques of final projects
- radio beyond the transmitter
- going from print to audio and back again
- how to freelance public radio, launch your own podcast, or enhance your print pieces
- guest:** NPR Correspondent Mike Pesca

[Syllabus subject to change; check your email for changes to the schedule and/or assignments.]

References

These suggested websites are not required, but you will find them very helpful.

Transom: A Showcase and Workshop for New Public Radio.

A great site for technical and reporting tips, with sample work from people new to the medium.

HYPERLINK "http://transom.org" <http://transom.org>

PRX: Public Radio Exchange

An online repository for audio content from independent producers, production companies and public radio stations. Sign up for a free listener account and gain access to thousands of stories.

HYPERLINK "http://prx.org" <http://prx.org>

Third Coast International Audio Festival

HYPERLINK "http://www.thirdcoastfestival.org" <http://www.thirdcoastfestival.org/>

Association of Independents in Radio (see Radio College section)

HYPERLINK "http://airmedia.org" <http://airmedia.org>

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