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ARTICLE

The Pabulum of Public Radio and Podcasting: Why It Is Bad and How Academia Can Help

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Abstract

It is possible to communicate academic thought without being reductive, but that rarely happens in U.S. news media. Instead, academia is mined to produce journalistic edutainment: a media product that turns information into entertainment. Edutainment is pervasive, particularly in U.S. public radio and podcasting, the medium in which the authors work. A major reason edutainment dominates audio is that it is difficult to convey complex ideas in sound. Listeners, unlike readers, cannot control the speed at which they engage with material, which puts them at constant risk of getting lost. In U.S. public radio, the default solution is to make information entertaining. This approach has encouraged strict rules about everything from the length of stories and use of sound to the tone of narration and narrative structure. These rules all but ensure the production of edutainment. It does not have to be this way. Audio can be a powerful medium for academic work. To succeed, one must not pander but instead challenge the rules and explore new formats that honor the complexity of academic work. This is the story of our attempt to do just that with a new audio show, *Ways of Knowing.*

Keywords: audio; media; podcasts; public radio; *Ways of Knowing*

1. Introduction

A chasm has grown between academia and American news media. The authors of this article have been working in public radio in the United States for almost twenty years. Even in our medium, where part of the mission is public education, academic perspectives are sparse. When they do appear, they are often severely constrained: a quote from a professor who serves as an expert, a fact lifted from research to bolster a narrative, or a short interview about a major breakthrough. The conventions of the medium force this reduction, squeezing out much of the richness and rigor of academia that make it valuable to public discourse. It is a similar story in newspapers, television, and digital media. At the same time, American news media has become more anti-intellectual, while academic communication has become more insular. Conference talks and academic papers are often so filled with jargon and narrow in scope that they are generally inaccessible to anyone outside of the field. We believe that the solution to this gulf between academia and U.S. media is not for more journalists to masquerade as academics; nor is it for academics to reduce their work to fit the formats of news media. Instead, journalists and professors can collaborate on projects that

break academic and news conventions with the goal of making media that will introduce the diverse and complex ideas of academia into public discourse in a deep, provocative, and meaningful way.

For the last decade, this has been the mission of the authors of this article, culminating in a podcast we launched last year, *Ways of Knowing.* In each season of the show, we collaborate with a college or university to produce a series on a different topic in the humanities or social sciences. What differentiates the show from the many podcasts about academic research and anything you had hear on American public radio or in podcasts is its distinct approach to form. Instead of just a straight interview or narrative program, every season has a different format designed to introduce listeners to academic thought without sacrificing its complexity and rigor. It took us years to develop the sound design elements, narrative structures, and conceptual approaches we use in the show, many of which draw on traditions that have largely been forgotten in contemporary U.S. public radio and podcasting: sound art, field recording, experimental music, and even earlier eras of public radio itself. We adapted and honed these non-standard approaches to audio by collaborating with academics to unlearn what we had been taught in media and challenge the way people in the academy express their ideas. This article tells the story of how and why we made this show, with the hope that it can be a model for other journalists and academics who wish to collaborate. We focus on U.S. public radio and podcasting because it is the industry in which we work and because it provides a strong case study for the formal barriers in American media that hinder intellectual content from reaching the public.

2. Journalistic edutainment

Our story starts in 2015. We had both been working in public radio for almost a decade: ten years making audio journalism for local stations in the San Francisco Bay Area like KALW and KQED, and national programs such as *All Things Considered, Morning Edition*, and *Marketplace.* We firmly believed in NPR's mission to "cultivate an informed public, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of events, ideas, and cultures."[1] Both of us felt like the work happening in academia, particularly the humanities and social sciences, was an essential part of that mission, but we could rarely get it into our radio pieces. When we tried, it generally ended in dissatisfaction – a killed story, a piece edited beyond recognition, an ungainly final product that was neither entertaining nor informative. It was a constant uphill battle that left us fatigued, deflated, and at odds with our superiors.

Part of the problem lies in academia, which has become increasingly insular. Professors are often unpracticed at expressing themselves in synthesized, understandable ways; disciplines are filled with jargon and cumbersome rhetorical conventions; and there are perverse incentives in the pathways to academic jobs, publishing, and tenure that encourage one to be obscure and even inscrutable.[2] The insularity of academia, however, is surmountable. The much bigger issue is on our side, the media side. Even when we had an idea from academia or a bit of research that would be valuable to share, we were rarely able to translate it into radio pieces. It was nearly impossible to fit academic work into the form of what we were directed to produce, which was all beginning to sound the same to us: another 4-minute feature,

[1] *National Public Radio* (NPR) is a broadly popular news source in the United States. For American standards, it is left of center, and among journalists and the public at large, it is generally seen as a trusted standard bearer for delivering the news. Their full Mission Statement: https://www.npr.org/about.

[2] Karin Fischer touches on some of these issues in her 2023 article for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*: https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-insular-world-of-academic-research (Fischer 2023).

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another 60-second news spot, another brief interview, and another narrative story. We came to realize that this sameness was the key to understanding why we rarely succeeded. It was not specific editors or gatekeepers, but this strict control of format that made it difficult to produce audio that shared the ideas and work of academia with the public in any meaningful way.

Public radio, like most mass media in America, is tightly controlled on a formal level. There are guidelines about everything: from the length of quotes and use of sound to the tone of the narration and story structure. Editors and managers defend these conventions as natural and neutral – just the way to make good radio and be a good journalist. But that is not true. They have evolved to make sure every piece of content informs and entertains in just that particular public radio way. The resulting media product is a kind of journalistic "edutainment" that makes the consumer feel smart and knowledgeable without having to do too much work.

Since the 1950s, edutainment has generally been used to talk about children's programming that promises to educate and entertain – content designed to make you feel like you are learning something and having fun while doing it.[3] This describes much of what you encounter on U.S. public radio: curious, engaging, and seemingly intellectual, but not too complex or critical, which might risk alienating its consumers. The primary goal is not to challenge or instigate but to use the information to entertain, which is what all the formal rules of radio mentioned above are designed to ensure: pieces are kept short and digestible; narrative twists and turns are painstakingly arranged to build to a satisfying conclusion; clear takeaways are presented; and stories and interviews are meticulously signposted to maintain attention throughout. These conventions leave little room for the listener to have their own thoughts and opinions. When it comes to any controversial topic, contrasting perspectives are placed side by side, assuring the listener that the two viewpoints define the acceptable boundaries on any given issue. The truth must lie in one position or the other, or somewhere in between. Of course, reality is not a both-sided affair. Life often does not have an engaging narrative with a resounding conclusion. And usually the big takeaway is that you need to think and learn more before you can come to any real understanding of the subject at hand. But all this can make one feel unsatisfied, challenged, or even daunted – feelings the conventions of public radio are designed to suppress.

Journalistic edutainment is not unique to public radio. It has become pervasive throughout American media, from *New Yorker* profiles and the op-ed pages of the *New York Times* to science documentaries and CNN news stories. Academia is a plentiful source of fodder for this media product. Scraps of research and insights are harvested and fed into the mold. What comes out is sanitized of its nuance and streamlined for wide appeal and easy digestion. This is doubly damaging to academic work. By design, journalistic edutainment limits the meaningful communication of complex ideas, while at the same time making those who consume it believe they are actually engaging with intellectual content.

[3] This origins of the word can be traced back to a 1954 article "Educational Values in Factual Nature Pictures" by Walt Disney in *Educational Horizons*: "*The True Life Adventures* are made, and will continue to be made, primarily as entertainment. They are not designed specifically for conventional education. But in my definition, the overlap is implicit" (82).

For a more contemporary etymological example (and there are many), a 2006 article by Alyssa Quart is an exploration of the media that are supposed to turn our toddlers into geniuses. She calls it "The Baby Genius Edutainment Complex" (Quart 2006).

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There have been some flashes of resistance to journalistic edutainment in U.S. public radio over the last decade: programs like *Ten Things That Scare Me* have unexpected structures and sound design; *Throughline* runs documentaries that probe controversial topics; *The Brian Lehrer* show has been providing historical context in its "100 Years of 100 Things" series; reporters like Howard Berkes and Peter Overby (both now retired) managed to work through the rules to deliver critical, thought-provoking stories; and even some established shows like *On The Media* still allow for a range of segment lengths and narrative tone. These are outliers in a system dominated by journalistic edutainment. Some examples are obvious, like *TED Radio Hour*, which repackages bits of research for light entertainment. However, it is often harder to detect because it is deeply embedded in the form: the tight narrative and clear takeaways of a *Radiolab* episode; the both-siderist tendencies on NPR's news magazines; the constraining politeness of a Terry Gross interview. These conventions limit what can reach listeners as they screen out the complex, controversial, and challenging. No editor or boss tells you that the goal is this kind of edutainment. They do not have to. The rules ensure the product. Stories are held to a certain length, narratives massaged, takeaways foregrounded, intricacy flattened, and unsettling views softened and qualified until there is a product that will leave the listener satisfied, untroubled, and ready to move on with their day.

This has not always been the case. NPR itself has a long history of formal innovation and experimentation. When it was conceived in the late 1960s, part of the mission was to bring perspectives from member stations all over the country to the ears of a national audience, a radical proposition in itself. Programs across the network ranged widely in style and approach. Listeners got to hear hour-long, sound-rich audio trips from Keith Talbot, the languid narratives of Joe Frank, and documentaries like *Father Cares*, where an NPR host embodies the character of one of the survivors of Jonestown. Risks were taken and rules broken. On any given night, there might be a story from some rural corner of the country, a sound like the crashing inside of a barrel going over Niagara Falls, or an opera explaining the pros and cons of raising interest rates.[4] Things were happening on public radio that were not on other national outlets: reporters were interviewing everyday people, space was being made for the arts, and there was more diversity in positions of power. The first woman to ever anchor a national nightly news broadcast in the United States did it on public radio.[5]

Over the last two decades that we have worked in public radio, we have seen the experimentation of the past curtailed, the variation from member stations diminished, and the commitment to the arts and public education hollowed out. Much of this change has been enforced by a hardening of formal rules about things like length, tone, and structure – rules that are designed to ensure the production of public radio's particular brand of edutainment. A major driver of this dogma is "the public radio mothership," NPR, which has clung to its rules more aggressively since the network's audience numbers began dropping precipitously in 2017. In response, executives have doubled down – demanding shorter stories and a more conversational tone. The public media trade magazine, *Current*, reported that NPR's acting Chief Content Officer sent an email to staff in the fall of 2024 announcing that *All Things Considered* and *Morning Edition* would start incorporating "a broader mix of shorter and livelier stories, that are personally relevant, and delivered with an approachable

[4] Unsurprisingly, given NPR's lack of interest in its bygone creative endeavors, the audio of the opera, "Rato Interesso," is hard to find. A description of it can be found here: https://libertystreeteconomics.newyorkfed.org/2012/08/historical-echoes-not-so-classical-opera-explains-interest-rates/.

[5] https://www.npr.org/people/2101242/susan-stamberg.

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conversational style."[6] The ideal time length for stories would be reduced to just 2 or 3 minutes, and only once an hour would the programs be allowed to have a story over 5 minutes long. Part of the fear driving this change, according to the VP of news programming, is that public radio is coming across to listeners as "too formal and academic."[7]

The rules of public radio have become so rigid and effective that even media producers with the best intentions fall into the edutainment trap. Regardless of which interview guest you have on or story you aim to tell, there is immense pressure to squash it into something that sounds similar to everything else on public radio – a piece of content that informs listeners in a way that makes them feel as if they have learned all they need to know about a particular topic. The key to breaking free from journalistic edutainment is to challenge the rules that ensure its production. Through experimentation with format (e.g. altering the length of stories, tone of narration, narrative structure, use of sound, and presentation of facts and viewpoints), we can find ways to create audio that can hold more challenging ideas and can make listeners curious, encourage them to think, and provide an entryway into the rich and complex work in academia that is largely absent from public discourse.

3. Pushing against the rules

An easy solution to all this, at least professionally for us, might have been simply to get out of the radio industry and switch to a less controlled platform: podcasting. In theory, podcasting should free us from these constraints: with no strict formal guidelines or time limits, one ought to be able to be as intellectually rigorous as one pleases. However, it does not work out that way. Podcasting is largely built on the formal rules honed in public radio. One first has to free oneself of inherited conventions (every show needs intro music), styles (speak in a folksy, conversational way), and practices (use ambient sound literally: in a story about baristas, make sure to have the sound of coffee being ground) in order to make something new.

In 2015, we began our first, modest attempt to break out of this mold. We decided to experiment with extremely short audio pieces – just 90 seconds – which we hoped would allow us to escape some of the conventions of public radio. We did not want to hook listeners with a juicy narrative or deliver takeaways. Instead, we focused on sound. The mission was to present sounds in a way that let listeners have their own experiences of them. Over the course of a few years, we made around 130 episodes, each one about a specific, individual sound.[8] We tried to narrate as little as possible and in every episode aimed to have at least 45 seconds of unnarrated sound, an eternity in the world of public radio. We were trying to encourage attentive listening and give people a tiny bit of space to have their own thoughts and reactions, a project that felt radical in a society where media is focused on constantly directing and maintaining attention.[9]

The show was clearly limited: 90 seconds is not a lot of time to get deep into more nuanced matters. However, making this uncharacteristically short show helped us realize what should have been obvious to anyone working in radio: that a big part of the power of audio

[6] https://current.org/2024/09/npr-updates-newsmag-strategy-to-address-audience-declines/?utm_source=substack&wallit_nosession=1.

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] Our episodes can be found here: https://www.theworldaccordingtosound.org/podcastepisodes.

[9] An early interview about our 90-second podcast: https://www.kqed.org/arts/11971346/the-world-according-to-sound-lets-listeners-create-their-own-experiences.

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lay in its ability to create an experience for a listener, which is a valuable way to encourage critical thought and engagement with complex ideas. Audio is actually a fairly poor form for explaining difficult concepts the way you would in writing. It is hard for listeners to follow because they cannot control the speed at which they digest the material. In public radio, the default solution to this problem is to try and make the information entertaining – to reduce and spice it up with the hope that people would not tune out. The reason public radio falls into this trap is because the focus is primarily on content (*what* information is delivered), instead of format (*how* that information is delivered). If you consider the experience audio can create through its form, you will find there is a much broader range of ways to engage listeners even when dealing with the most complex and arcane subject matter.

Our next attempt to find new ways of engaging listeners was to expand the podcast to an immersive, hour-long show that allowed for novel ways of accessing knowledge through the sustained experience of sound. In 2017, we took the sounds we had been collecting for the podcast and turned them into a live performance. We debuted the piece at an arts space in San Francisco. In our live show, which we have performed many times since, we set up a ring of eight loudspeakers around the audience, pass out eye masks, turn off the lights, and move sounds all around the room. We narrate very little, just enough to give some context to each sound. The audio is mixed so that every speaker can be individually controlled, allowing us to move sound to different parts of the space. A tennis ball can fly over your head from one side of the room to the other. Ants can scurry in and out of different speakers. And the cables of the Golden Gate Bridge can twang and thrum on all sides. Our central premise is simple: sound provides an alternative way of understanding the world, a different way of knowing from language and dialectic.[10] This idea quickly became the central mission of our work and is what helped us form the collaborations at colleges and universities that would eventually lead to our academic podcast, *Ways of Knowing.*[11]

Before working on this octophonic, live sound show, we were largely ignorant of the rich tradition of *soundscape composition:* using field recordings to create aesthetic sound works. Despite its importance in the history of audio and its clear overlap with podcasting and radio, it is not something we were ever introduced to in our radio careers. As we worked on our live show, we started to become aware of sound artists, musicians, and theorists like R. Murray Schafer, Jonathan Sterne, Hildegard Westerkamp, Pauline Oliveros, Barry Truax, Chris Watson, and Bill Fontana (to name a few).[12] Listening to their work and reading their

[10] The idea that sound provides an alternative perspective has been gaining traction in sound studies and is the subject of works like Lawrence Kramer's *The Hum of the World: A Philosophy of Listening* (Kramer 2001).

It is also what separates our live sound show from other non-traditional, communal listening projects, like the well-known American *Third Coast Festival* or the British *In the Dark* project. Those are still tightly bound to linguistic and narrative forms, whereas we have almost abandoned those completely.

[11] At just one institution, Stanford University, dozens of professors are researching how sound provides an alternative way of knowing: https://news.stanford.edu/stories/2018/07/learning-through-sound.

[12] Schafer coined the term "soundscape," and advocated generally for a serious analysis of the acoustic information in our sonic environments (Schafer 1993). Sterne's deep analysis of modes of listening and their cultural dependencies influence our work greatly (Sterne 2003, 2012a, 2012b). Westerkamp is a Canadian-German sound artist and pioneer of the "soundwalk," which she describes as "any excursion whose main purpose is listening to the environment. It is exposing our ears to every sound around us no matter where we are...Wherever we go we will give our ears priority. They have been neglected by us for a long time and, as a result, we have done little to develop an acoustic environment of good quality." Oliveros is a proponent of "deep listening" and a central figure in the development of post-war experimental and electronic music (Oliveros 2005). Truax is friends with Westerkamp, and together they work in the field of soundscape composition – a more refined and sophisticated practice of what The World According to Sound was attempting in its live shows. Truax is also a strong advocate of octophonic compositions. Watson is a British field recordist and prolific composer. Fontana is an American sound artist.

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ideas helped us realize the extent to which we had been limited in the audio form. It led us to revisit radio history and listen to old productions like *War of The Worlds*, *The Hitchhiker*, and the work of pioneering producers like Tony Schwartz. In our live show, we began to experiment with blending approaches from the tradition of soundscape composition and the history of radio with the work we had done as journalists. Creating the live show was a hands-on lesson in the history of audio and the potential of the medium – one that we wished we had experienced much earlier in our career as radio journalists and one that would be essential for the academic collaborations we were about to embark on.

The live show was a success, and we decided to take it on the road. When we began reaching out to venues, we got an especially positive reception from colleges and universities. The show had an intellectual basis in sound studies, media studies, and journalism; it was connected to the world of podcasts; and it took a novel approach to the overwhelmingly rational discourse typically encountered in media. All of these things were attractive to faculty and students: schools such as Boston University, Harvard, Brown, Skidmore, and Cornell booked us to put on the show and guest lecture. We packed up our gear into a van and headed out on tour. Little did we know this would eventually lead us to make a podcast explicitly about academic work.

4. Audio in the academy

On the tour, we developed a strong relationship with the faculty at Cornell, particularly Jeremy Braddock, an English professor with an interest in media studies. He was working on a book about *The Firesign Theatre* and introduced us to their work, which was yet another example of historically important, format-breaking audio that we had not encountered in our public radio careers. Our experiential approach resonated with Braddock as a way to allow people access to new ways of thinking through sound. He became a dear friend and intellectual ally who forever changed the trajectory of our work. He organized a semester-long residency for us at Cornell that we began in the fall of 2019. Our main project was to create a new experiential sound show. This time it would be highly thematic: the university itself. More specifically, what does Cornell "sound" like? We recorded dorms and dining halls; a particle accelerator, conversational Latin, and the stomach of a cow; 19th-century kinetic machines, the mechanics of a pipe organ, and research on mating spiders, vibrating deserts, and dying plants. We turned the recordings into a public art installation on campus – a telephone booth outfitted with speakers, so people could step in and listen to the sounds of the university – and then into one of our live shows, which we performed in front of more than 400 students, faculty, and members of the public.[13]

The residency proved decisive. We were put in direct contact with so many realms in academia that we were rarely able to interact with as journalists. We realized how many of the formats we were forced to work in hindered these connections and made it easy to get only certain types of academics airtime: the economist, political scientist, or STEM scientist. Philosophers, philologists, and literature professors – humanists – are generally marginalized and relegated to token appearances. Through our residency, we finally saw an

[13] If you are curious about the telephone booth, you can see a picture of it here. We opted for a gritty Bell Atlantic from a nearby junkyard. We realized after we installed it that no undergraduate had probably ever used a payphone for its original intended purpose, and that from now on, this strange sound booth would most likely be their primary association with the technological relic (https://news.cornell.edu/stories/2019/11/cornell-according-sound-offers-sonic-look-campus).

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opportunity to change that. The opportunity lay in expanding on the formal approaches to audio we had been developing in our podcast and live show.

It is relevant to add that neither of the authors is an academic. We have bachelor's degrees in the humanities (English and Classics), but our formal education stops there. We think the combination of a professional career in media (in our case, audio) with personal academic interests (in our case, critical theory, philosophy, linguistics, and literature) made us take the turn we did. And we believe this is a model. We need not only academics who want to reach a larger audience but also media makers who want to help them do so.

5. Attentive listening

After our semester at Cornell, we began producing more shows that we performed live and later streamed during the pandemic. We have made 10 different programs on a range of topics, from themed programs like "Time" and "Bodies," to one all about birds. In these shows, we refined approaches that deviated sharply from the constraining conventions of public radio. We played with the tone of narration, length of sound montages, and placement of information. We spatialized audio, remixed archival material, sonified data, and combined traditional public radio narratives with sound art. Our goal was to create sonic experiences that encouraged listeners to engage with complex topics and ideas. Our experimentation drew the attention of media producers inside the public radio world, like Rob Rosenthal, who interviewed us twice for his program *HowSound*; as well as academics, like Kate Galloway, who wrote a paper about "how we transformed traditional paradigms of the broadcast medium."[14] Out of the work we did on these live shows, and the connections we made with academics along the way, came the idea of making a podcast devoted to translating work in the humanities and social sciences into audio that was accessible to the public but still honored the complexity and depth of the original material.

Plenty of podcasts already exist about academic work. There has been a boom of so-called "scholarly podcasts" in recent years – shows made by academics about their fields of expertise. These are typically interview shows: two professors having a discussion about topic X. (There are exceptions, of course, but their rarity proves the rule: Mack Hagood's *Phantom Power*, for example, blends interviews of scholars and sound artists with unique sound design.)[15] Like public radio, most of these scholarly podcasts are designed around content and neglect form, often to an obvious degree: recording qualities are generally poor, interviews unstructured and unsympathetic to the medium, voice editing techniques rudimentary, and sound design largely absent. Few people listen to these shows, which have, like public radio, ignored the experiential potential of the medium, one that we firmly believe is important for audio to have a lasting impression, or in fact be remembered at all.

[14] Galloway 2022 (https://ouci.dntb.gov.ua/en/works/4KX8ZPNl/); Rosenthal 2016 (https://transom.org/2016/short-is-beautiful/); Rosenthal 2020 (https://transom.org/2020/a-night-of-ear-candy-sam-harnett-and-chris-hoff/).

[15] *Phantom Power* featured *The World According to Sound* twice, largely because of our mix of academic work with new audio formats: https://phantompod.org/ep-32-the-world-according-to-sound-chris-hoff-and-sam-harnett/; https://phantompod.org/cosmic-visions-in-sound/ (Hagood 2021, 2024).

Another show, *The Continuing Studies Podcast*, an American production that "explore[s] the intersection of higher education and podcasting," featured us in October 2024. The producers of *Continuing Studies* have listened to and reviewed hundreds of academic podcasts and remarked that *Ways of Knowing* is "probably the most unique podcast we've had on to date." We note this observation as evidence of the paucity of innovation in using the medium to communicate academic ideas: https://www.continuingstudiespodcast.com/episodes/using-sound-as-storytelling-in-academic-podcasts.

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A relevant aside: we got about eight of our original 90-second sound episodes on NPR's *All Things Considered* back in 2015 and 2016. Years later, on our tours, we would hear from strangers who remembered hearing our episode about ants or the Golden Gate Bridge on the radio. Four or five years *after* hearing the ants on their car stereo, they could still recall that sound – that idea of tiny creatures making audible footprints. Compare this to the hundreds of public radio stories we have made over the years. Few people, if any, remember these pieces weeks or even days after they air. Even friends and relatives could rarely recall the topic, let alone the content! When everything sounds the same, how could something possibly break through?

There are now some 3.5 million total podcasts in the world, and according to the podcast-hosting website Buzzsprout, more than half of these get fewer than 30 listens per episode in the first week.[16] Many people are making audio that very few people ever interact with. Given the deluge of podcasts and media in general over the last five years, chances are slim for any low-production, scholarly podcast to stand out and reach a significant audience.[17] They might be of interest to niche audiences, but we think there are much more effective ways audio can help bridge the gap between academia and the public. Even if a scholar desired to make a successful show that sounded different from the standard interview program, it is a tall task – akin to a journalist writing a rigorous, impactful academic work. Producing media is a craft, and like academic scholarship, it requires years of dedication. We believe the better tact is for more academics and journalists to work together and combine their different strengths. That was the main idea behind *Ways of Knowing.*

6. *Ways of Knowing*

In every season of *Ways of Knowing*, we work with professors at a different academic institution to create audio that communicates academic work to the public without sacrificing its rigor. The show is built on the years we spent experimenting with audio formats, learning about the approaches and ideas of other sonic traditions, and collaborating with academics. We began working on *Ways of Knowing* in 2021 and started releasing seasons in the fall of 2023. As of March 2025, we have published five seasons and are set to release two more. Each season has a new topic and a different format tailored to the subject material.

We produced the first season with the University of Washington and our second with Johns Hopkins University.[18] At first, both may appear to resemble what you might hear on public radio, but they have formal elements that set them apart. In the UW series, every episode begins with an examination of research being done by a professor. However, instead of trying to present an easily digestible and conclusive narrative, the research serves as a springboard to introduce different ways of knowing in the humanities, such as material cultural analysis, close reading, and translation studies. Each episode ends with an auditory bibliography: a further reading section that provides listeners with resources to continue learning about the way of knowing they just encountered. In our season with Johns Hopkins, we produced eight stories about the history of astronomy told through a humanistic lens. Each episode builds on the previous to construct a larger argument about a pervasive

[16] https://www.buzzsprout.com/stats.

[17] https://www.listennotes.com/podcast-stats/.

[18] Season 1, *Ways of Knowing*: https://www.theworldaccordingtosound.org/ways-of-knowing; Season 2, *Cosmic Visions*: https://www.theworldaccordingtosound.org/cosmic-visions.

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misunderstanding of science: that it is an entirely rational, data-driven affair, instead of an interdisciplinary, and at times quite imprecise, endeavor.

In the following seasons, we used much more unconventional formats. Season 3, produced with the University of Chicago, looks at the role of metaphor in science.[19] The entire podcast is combined into a 2-hour show with 18 vignettes that present diverse perspectives on the subject. Each vignette is formally very different – some are information-driven, some experiential, some narrative, and some have almost no narration at all. This kaleidoscopic approach allows us to dispense with the hand-holding narrator, and is similar to the style we developed for our hour-long live audio shows, a style that made it much easier to create aesthetic experiences that we could not achieve through purely rational discourse.[20] We are using a similar approach in Season 5, which we produced in collaboration with Cornell University.[21] Every episode combines archival material, theory, sound montage, and narration to consider how a different object acts as a piece of media that influences what we think, how we think, and what is even possible to think. The episodes are co-produced with faculty as works of scholarship – sonic essays that provide perspective on a subject that could not be accessed in the same way through writing.

Finally, in our season with Claremont McKenna College, we are combining the research of scholars working in four different disciplines into a four-part radio documentary about a single subject: the imaginary.[22] The decision to focus on a broad idea, like the imaginary, and come at it from seemingly unrelated angles would be a lot to ask in the interview- or story-based formats of public radio. Instead of spelling out how the ideas in the episodes relate, we leave that work to the listener, encouraging them to make their own connections and insights. This approach allows us to contrast very different subjects, like the reader-response theory of literary studies, the knowledge argument of philosophy, and textualist interpretations of the constitution – a constellation of topics we had never be able to thread together if we were driving toward a major reveal or takeaway, as is common in shows like *Radiolab* or *99 Percent Invisible.*

Ways of Knowing is a product of collaboration – between journalists who want to challenge the reductive formats of their medium, and academics who are willing to translate their work into an unfamiliar form. It is not a blockbuster, but it is in the top 5% in listenership of all podcasts. Excerpts have appeared on large public radio programs like *Science Friday* and stations like KALW in San Francisco, and our academic partners are using episodes internally as teaching tools and to encourage students to study the humanities and social sciences. Although it is clear that we would not have made the show if we were forced to adhere to the conventions of public radio, we are not suggesting that the formal approaches we describe above are the only ways to translate academic ideas and research for the public, or that they are even new. The show is a proof of concept, just one example of what can be made when the

[19] Season 3, *An Inexact Science*: https://www.theworldaccordingtosound.org/inexact-science.

[20] Resisting the hand-holding narrator is not a new idea, of course. One need only look to Bill Fontana's ambient-driven *Soundscapes* that aired on KQED in San Francisco, Glenn Gould's *The Idea of North* on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, or any number of contemporary British radio/audio makers (Eleanor McDowall, Alan Hall, and Chris Watson) (Gould 1967). However, in an American news media context, such an idea is almost wholly forgotten in 2025.

[21] Season 5, *Media Objects*: https://www.theworldaccordingtosound.org/media-objects.

[22] Season 4, *The Imaginary*: https://www.theworldaccordingtosound.org/theimaginary. On a related note, we want to thank Amy Kind of Claremont McKenna College, whom we collaborated with on Season 4. She made us aware of this journal's call for submissions and provided integral feedback as we worked on it.

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formats of media that make it so hard to feature academic work are challenged, and when the goal is not just to create media that edutains, but honors the complexity of its subject and leaves those who encounter it curious and wanting to learn more.

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