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Walter Benjamin, *This American Life* and the Politics of
Storytelling

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1. Introduction

According to audio program director John Biewen, we currently live in a “golden age” of radio storytelling (“Introduction”). Yet, the contemporary interest in storytelling extends beyond the medium of radio and is notable in various spheres of life such as politics, business and science. Storytelling is consequently often also understood as a means of persuasion, a mode of understanding or a marketing ploy. In addition, the figure of the storyteller is enjoying similar attention and popularity as many journalist and authors present themselves as such. At first glance, the current prevalence of both the concept and practice of storytelling appears quite contradictory to Walter Benjamin’s 1936 essay “The Storyteller” in which he predicted the imminent demise of storytelling and the storyteller.

Benjamin’s preoccupation with storytelling was part of his career-spanning interest in the effects of media on modern interaction and communication. Although he cited technological advancements and the advent of the information industry as detrimental to the art of storytelling, he was nevertheless eager to explore the political potential of mass media. His essays on of visual media such as film and photography have often been discussed in various academic fields. Yet, during the late 1920s and early 1930s, Benjamin also created and narrated various radio programmes. He furthermore wrote various essays on the medium of radio. In these works, and “The Storyteller,” Benjamin provides a critical framework to apply to the prevalence of storytelling programmes in mass media in the twenty-first century.

Thus far, most critics have used “The Storyteller” to discuss the manner in which the absence of traditional storytelling is thematised in modern literature. For instance, David Kelman argues that the form of the short story demonstrates the fragmentary nature of modern experience and provides readers with the unnatural experience of shock. Rita Barnard observes that the practice of providing counsel continues in modern media such as the newspaper. Yet, she observes that texts such as Nathanael West’s *Miss Lonelyhearts*

demonstrate the difficulty or impossibility of providing meaningful advice in the modern setting of newspaper offices. Others question Benjamin's claims, and attempt to demonstrate, that the practice of traditional storytelling continues in modern media. Areti Dragas argues that the novel continues the tradition of storyteller and that novelists can be seen as storytellers.

In addition, Ariel Gratch and Nathan Crick explore the possibilities that new media provide for traditional storytelling. They observe the continuous presence of Benjaminian figures such as the storyteller and the charlatan in contemporary Internet personalities. Their claim that Benjamin's discussion of media and storytelling remains relevant "In the age of digital reproducibility" is affirmed by Jaeho Kang (315). In his *Walter Benjamin and the Media*, Kang observes that Benjamin's writings demonstrate an awareness of new media's potential for both shared experiences and the isolation and privatization of the individual (67, 69).

Critics such as Alexander Freund and Areti Dragas note that although storytelling has become a "buzzword," it lacks a widely accepted and clear definition (Freund 97).¹ This is also illustrated by the fact that their discussions are preoccupied with widely diverging storytelling phenomena. Given Benjamin's preoccupation with the effects of media on storytelling, his essays consequently hold interesting implications for the contemporary practice of storytelling.

Ira Glass' radio programme *This American Life (TAL)* is an important part of the current golden age of radio storytelling. In fact, Biewen cites *TAL* as the archetypal programme on which subsequent storytelling programs have been modelled. The weekly programme is available to listeners both through the medium of radio and as a podcast

¹ Similarly, Kay Stone argues that the term storyteller "is vague enough to cover a multiplicity of performance acts" (234).

available on the Internet. The website provides listeners with the opportunity to select a topic using tags or through the selection of a community. *TAL* has remained popular since its creation in 1995. The podcast is “often the most popular podcast in the country” as 2.5 million people download each episode and another 2.2 million listen to the radio programme (“About”). Its longevity and function as a model for other storytelling programmes place *TAL* at the centre of the contemporary storytelling hype.

Thus, given *TAL*’s enduring popularity, a more extensive discussion of the programme’s connection to the practice of storytelling and its political implications could illuminate its function in the contemporary mediascape. Benjamin’s interest in both storytelling and mass-mediated political art could advance the understanding of storytelling programmes such as *TAL*. In addition, Benjamin’s theories, formulated during the early twentieth century, can be critically examined in relation to a modern form of storytelling that shares ties with both tradition and information culture. Both can be used as a means to examine and contextualise the contemporary preoccupation, if not obsession, with storytelling. What role do the media play in constituting a return, or continuation, of storytelling? What are the political implications of mediated storytelling?

The first two chapters will analyse Benjamin’s writings and function as a framework for the discussion of *TAL*. The first chapter will discuss his understanding of the medium of radio, his discussion of storytelling and his concept of the aura of art. The second chapter will discuss Benjamin’s interpretation of the political potential of mass media such as radio and the newspaper. It will touch on the changes in the nature of the information industry since Benjamin’s death in 1940. The third chapter will discuss the role of radio in the United States in relation to audience participation. It will subsequently discuss the aspirations of public radio and contextualise *TAL*. The chapter will discuss several episodes of *TAL* to illustrate the manner in which radio functions as both a nation-building and polarising medium. The fourth

chapter will focus on the history and implications of autobiographical storytelling and thus contextualise the current storytelling hype. It will discuss *TAL* in relation to some of the concerns and possibilities of mass-mediated personal storytelling. The concluding chapter will attempt to answer the proposed questions.

2. Benjamin: Political Art and Auratic Art

Walter Benjamin's media career started in radio broadcasting. As media sociologist Jaeho Kang observes in *Walter Benjamin and the Media*, Benjamin was a "media practitioner before he was a media theorist" (13). Benjamin's career on the radio started in 1927, only a few years after the first German radio broadcast in 1923 (65). He subsequently wrote, directed and narrated radio programmes for both Radio Berlin and Radio Frankfurt until 1933 (Rosenthal I; Kang 67). The majority of Benjamin's radio broadcasts were children's programmes, however, he also created various radio plays for adults. In addition, he developed listening models reflecting his ideas on radio broadcasting (Rosenthal, "Walter"). Furthermore, in her introduction to Benjamin's radio works Lecia Rosenthal points out that Benjamin presented various essays on the radio (xxii). In fact, multiple essays were initially written for oral narration on the radio and derive their unique style from this purpose (Kang 73).

Benjamin's involvement with radio was during the medium's "period of incunabula" (Rosenthal xiv). Unlike many of his contemporaries, Benjamin did not view radio solely as an additional platform for lectures and literature. He also reflected on the newly emerging medium in relation to its social and political implications. Furthermore, he opted for a new approach to the novel medium. In his short essays on radio, Benjamin foregrounded the importance of the medium in the determination of content. As Kang observes, Benjamin took a materialist approach to radio and believed that the new medium required a new form of content that was tailored specifically to its unique characteristics (70–5). In his writings on radio Benjamin emphasises both radio's advisory and educational potential and the necessity of audience involvement in radio broadcasts. This interest in the emancipatory potential of radio, demonstrated by both his radio work and writings on radio, is indicative of his career-spanning preoccupation with the emancipatory potential of mass media.

Given the widespread cross-disciplinary interest in Benjamin's writings on media, the lack of attention to his writings on radio, and his work as a broadcaster, is remarkable (Kang 75; Rosenthal ix). Many scholars, in various fields, have attempted to adapt his writings on media to the "age of digital reproduction" (Gratch 307). Benjamin's essays on print media such as the novel and newspaper as well as the media of film and photography have been discussed at length, whereas his interest and involvement in the medium of radio has often been neglected. This can be partially understood in relation to the overall focus on visual media. Radio as a medium has a history of being overlooked in favour of visual media. Rosenthal discusses the lack of archival material of the early period of radio and points out that the lack of surviving recordings problematizes a discussion of Benjamin's role as radio broadcaster (xii–xiii).

Furthermore, after his career on the radio was terminated by the Nazi regime in 1933, Benjamin expressed disregard for the medium in his correspondences (Kang 75; Rosenthal xvii). According to Kang, these disparaging comments are partially to blame for scholars' neglect of Benjamin's radio work. In his seminal 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility," Benjamin also foregrounds visual media. Yet, Kang notes Benjamin's subsequent disdain for his radio work was likely the result of the disappointment of the end of his radio career and the following period of financial hardship (75). As Kang observes, Benjamin's writings and transcripts demonstrate that he was very committed to his exploration of radio's implications for storytelling and communication as well as its political potential.

Kang situates Benjamin's preoccupation with the "communicability of experience," as discussed in 1936 in "The Storyteller" within the context of a larger concern for the changing nature of human communication (25). Kang notes that in his radio work, Benjamin turned to the conventions of storytelling as a means to approach the new medium and as a way to

restore the erosion of human communication in modernity (40). In essays such as “Reflections on Radio” Benjamin stresses the communicational and interactive potential of the medium. Although Benjamin did not attempt to “construct a nostalgic revival of storytelling as face-to-face communication” in his radio work, he nevertheless recognised the medium’s potential for “mediated storytelling” (97, 75). Kang explains that Benjamin’s exploration of radio narrative derived from his understanding of storytelling as “a prototype of communication” (98). He consequently attempted to use storytelling conventions to fully explore the potential of radio (76). In his focus on speech and language suitable to radio, the medium’s inherently interactive potential and his attempts to generate critical thought and reflection in his listener by letting them “judge for themselves,” Benjamin attempted to employ the medium of radio in favour of both communication and audience emancipation (76).

Thus, Benjamin was preoccupied with the impact of media on human interaction and communication throughout his career. During the 1920s and 1930s, when Benjamin was writing on storytelling and media, important steps towards understanding the nature of oral storytelling were undertaken by Milman Parry and Albert Lord. After studying the practice of oral storytelling in Yugoslavia, Parry and Lord formulated their seminal theory that Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* derived from an oral tradition of bards that spanned many generations. This increased both the awareness of the continued function of “oral epic singers” and challenged the Romantic concept of authorship and creativity (Jahanderie 7). In oral cultures, the creativity of the storyteller resides in his ability to adapt traditional material to the needs of the audience rather than the invention of a unique style (8–9).

Benjamin notes that oral storytelling thrived during the middle Ages. The communal setting of craftsmen and the rhythm of the work facilitated the telling of traditional lore and stories “from afar” (Benjamin 89). In addition to the advent of print, the reorganisation of society in modernity, the loss of personal interaction and the weakening of communal ties are

all cited as damnatory to the practice of storytelling. In “The Storyteller” Benjamin cites the invention of the printing press as an important factor in the loss of storytelling. According to Benjamin, the rise of the novel parallels the rise of the middle class and consequently reflects the concerns of the “private citizens and members of the middle class” (Kang 36). The novelist embodies the solitariness of modern man and can neither benefit from tradition nor provide counsel to others. For Benjamin, novelists, divorced from external world, are on a doomed quest for the meaning of life in a “rationalized yet fragmented and individualized society” (Kang 37).

In his discussion of the rise of the information industry in the nineteenth century, Benjamin notes that journalism further influenced the decline of the quality of language. He viewed the language employed in newspapers as a “primary symptom of the rapid atrophy of the communicability of experience” (Kang 40). Journalists aimed to present their work as objective and employed a detached style that “led to the de-subjectification of language and writing” (52). Whereas storytelling as a form of communication is deeply immersed in the human lifeworld, newspapers employ a supposedly objective jargon that is in fact “empty phrase de-contextualized from everyday life” (52–3).

Benjamin’s essay has often been discussed and his understanding of storytelling has been related to the modern era. In *The Return of the Storyteller in Contemporary Literature* Areti Dragas responds to Benjamin’s “erroneous belief that the oral and the written tradition, and their respective figureheads, were entirely separate” (265). She consequently offers an extensive exploration of the works of contemporary authors such as Salman Rushdie and John Barth to demonstrate that both the practice of storytelling and the figure of the storyteller still live “both within and outside the fictional world of the novel” (217).

Dragas cites the postmodern rejection of Romantic notions of originality and authenticity as a signpost of a return to the storytelling tradition within the scope of the novel. Whereas the Romantics viewed the figure of the author as a solitary genius, postmodern authors return to the figure of the communal storyteller, who is often present as a character in the text (199). According to Dragas, many contemporary authors favour the more communal practice of re-telling existing tales over original creation (195). Authors such as Barth consequently favour “communal truths” and “folk reality” over the psychological inclination of the realist novel as discussed by Benjamin (198).

Dragas does not focus on the aspects of “The Storyteller” and Benjamin’s media works that denote the practical changes in the organisation of society and the difference in oral speech and written language. She instead focuses on the storyteller as an almost mythical figure. Dragas argues that the storyteller is a “wise woman, seductress, magician, holy man, teacher and instructor, and also liar, devil, trickster, cheat” and is embodied by both the storytellers depicted in fiction and the authors who create the fiction (29). The interpretation of the storyteller as a timeless figure evokes Benjamin’s notion of the storyteller. For Benjamin, the storyteller

Joins the ranks of the teachers and sages. He has counsel—not for a few situations, as the proverb does, but for many, like the sage. For it is granted to him to reach back to a whole lifetime (a life, incidentally, that comprises not only his own experience but no little of the experience of others; what the storyteller knows from hearsay is added to his own). His gift is the ability to relate his life; his distinction, to be able to tell his entire life (107)

In “The Storyteller,” Benjamin equates the eponymous figure with a craftsman who draws on tradition yet crafts a unique narrative for every situation. His ability to “let the wick of his life

be consumed completely by the gentle flame of his story [...] is the basis of the incomparable aura about the storyteller” (109). As Andrew Benjamin points out, in Benjamin’s works “there is no doubt that there is a continuity as regards the question of whether or not the aura has been lost; however there is an oscillation [...] between a negative and positive response to the loss” (31). In “The Storyteller” Benjamin appears to mourn this loss.

In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility” Benjamin observes that “technology of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition. By replicating the work many times over, it substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence” (22). He defined the aura as “a strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be” (23). The aura of a work of art was contingent on its unique existence and connected to notions of “originality, creativity, eternity, genius and tradition” (Ben-Shaul 83). In this essay, published in the same year as “The Storyteller,” Benjamin adopts a favourable stance towards the loss of the aura of art and its “parasitic subservience to ritual” (24). He claims that mass media remove art from its ritualistic basis and consequently facilitate politically engaged art. For Benjamin, political, mass-mediated art was in opposition to auratic art. In addition to eroding the unique status of an artwork, mass media decrease the distance between the work of art and the observer and allow for a critical examination of the conditions of life. Yet, fascism, which “attempts to organize the newly proletarianized masses while leaving intact the property relations which they strive to abolish,” reinstates the aura to negate the political potential of mass media (41). Fascism “fabricated a fake beautifying aura of a total social order where the ‘original’ people parade before the ‘genial’ fascist leader” (Ben-Shaul 84). In the context of fascism, “the most advanced techniques of contemporary art primarily serve to beautify and propagate the image of power” (Kang 143). Benjamin’s nostalgia for the aura of storytelling is contingent solely

on the experience of storytelling in an unmediated context and as a historical practice that is incompatible with modern society.

Instead of debating whether the practice of traditional storytelling continues by means of literature, it is arguably more fruitful to discuss the similarities between Benjamin's perspective of storytelling and the current discourse surrounding storytelling. Dragas' text does not necessarily function to prove the "return of the storyteller" which is a complex issue that depends on one's beliefs about the function of storytelling in society, orality, literacy and human interaction and is a debate that can easily become prescriptive in nature. Rather, it illustrates the return of a particular stance towards storytelling. Like Benjamin, Dragas focuses on the difference between the solitary Romantic author and the storyteller who is part of a tradition. She imposes the characteristics of the storyteller, as discussed by Benjamin, on the figure of the author. As Benjamin's essay focused on the "incomparable aura about the storyteller" and the practice of storytelling it follows that an attempt to disprove his claim that storytelling is lost would have to restore the aura of this practice (109). Her presentation of the author-storyteller as a mythical figure, the timeless or eternal meaning of storytelling, albeit in different guises, and the authenticity of this practice is illustrative of a more widespread revived interest in the unifying, traditional and timeless character of storytelling that extends beyond Postmodern literature. This approach to storytelling can be situated in a larger contemporary perspective that storytelling, in its many guises, is an "ancient, sublime art" which generates a "sort of fundamental affinity with the people of all times and cultures" (Tumarkin). As cultural historian Maria Tumarkin notes, the practice of storytelling has acquired a particularly elevated status and often entails the promise of an almost transcendent experience as well as a means to achieve meaningful human connection.

As Kang illustrates, Benjamin's discussion of storytelling can be understood as an aspect of his career-spanning interest in communication. His understanding of storytelling as

an ideal form of communication can arguably shed some light on his stance towards the aura in “The Storyteller”. For Benjamin, the distance of tradition, which lends storytelling its aura, enables profound communication that entails the sharing of wisdom and meaningful counsel. Although for Benjamin this form of communication is lost partially as a result of advent of the printing press, his other works focus on the political potential of the newspapers and other media. Whereas media such as newspapers altered communication, they enabled political awareness and prompted audiences to reflect on their socio-political context.

3. Mass Media, Representation and Fragmentation

Benjamin's discussion of the political potential of mass media is multifaceted and complex. The possibility of the masses to represent themselves and their interests through mass media is an important issue in Benjamin's writings on the newspaper and film. In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility" Benjamin was concerned with the fact that in the medium of film "the masses emerge as a subject of history within representation but remain as passive objects in the political decision making process" (Kang 144). Benjamin discussed the manner in which "capitalism brings forth an accelerated development of technology that offers means of production capable of satisfying the needs of the exploited masses" (Ben-Shaul 82). Yet, the mass media also facilitated the further "exploitation by those owning the means of production" (82). Benjamin was writing in a period of great political upheaval and from a Marxist perspective. He was consequently predominantly preoccupied with the manner in which mass media were employed to mask the lack of actual change in the power relations of society. He believed that it was paramount to counter fascism that the masses would be able to "represent themselves and their interests" by means of film (Ben-Shaul 84). For Benjamin, media needed to accommodate "modern man's legitimate claim to being reproduced" in order to fulfil their political potential ("Work" 34).

3.1 Storytelling and the Newspaper

In "The Storyteller" Benjamin cites the advent of the newspaper as the predominant threat to the practice of storytelling. In addition to newspapers' detrimental effect on language, both the function and content of newspapers problematized storytelling and the novel. Kang notes that for Benjamin, the "rapid growth of the newspaper was indicative of the predominance of the middle class and the culmination of the expansion of mass media in the advanced

capitalist system” (38). Newspapers started publishing literature and altered the nature of literature and the role of the author (44). In his discussion of the history of newspapers, Benjamin noted that the increasing number of printing presses and the consequent lowering of subscription fees had reduced the content of many newspapers to mere sensationalism (42–3). Newspapers were forced to appeal to a broader readership and therefore often avoided in-depth discussions in favour of superficial gossip and sensation (43).

In addition, Benjamin also viewed information as antithetical to storytelling. Information, a “new form of communication,” is fleeting and undermines storytelling, which bears the weight of tradition and consequently enforces communal ties (“Storyteller” 88). Information “which supplies a handle for what is nearest” is unfavourably contrasted with stories that “came from afar” (89). In “The Work of Art” Benjamin attributes the loss of the aura to “the desire of the present day masses to get ‘closer to things’” which is enabled by mass media (23). Whereas storytelling communicated “the lore of faraway places” and “the lore of the past,” information’s relevance “does not survive the moment in which it was new” (90). According to Kang, Benjamin viewed information as “quantified experience deprived of the profundity of life” (39). Furthermore, information would fail to stimulate the critical faculty of readers as it inevitably arrived with an explanation of its meaning and is consequently soon forgotten. In addition, Kang notes that, according to Benjamin, newspapers promoted the concept of public opinion, which he viewed as a tool used to reinforce power and a means to dissuade critical judgement of readers (51–3).

Yet, in “The Author as Producer” Benjamin offered a tentatively optimistic account of the democratisation of the public through the newspaper as it is “in the theatre of the unbridled debasement of the word—the newspaper—that its salvation is being prepared” (225). He argued that although the newspaper had various detrimental effects on language and communication, it nevertheless constituted a medium in which the reader was no longer

subordinate to the author. Through the newspaper, the reader would become an expert “if not on a subject but only on the post he occupies” and he “gains access to authorship” (225).

Readers desired to see their “own interests expressed” and newspapers responded by providing a platform consisting of columns, reader’s opinions and letters (224). As readers developed an understanding of their new possibilities and a proficiency in relation to the new medium, they would become increasingly capable of assuming the role of the author.

Although Benjamin wrote the essay from a Marxist point of view in hopes of engaging authors in the struggle to aid the proletariat, his discussion of the role of the audience in relation to mass media is nevertheless relevant for a discussion of the widespread access to media and its implications for both emancipation and subordination of the public (Benjamin, “Author” 238). During Benjamin’s lifetime, mass media such as radio and cinematic news reels had already started to appropriate some of the newspaper’s functions pertaining to the dissemination of information. As Kang notes, the subsequent invention of the Internet has challenged the very existence of newspapers and has largely appropriated their function (64). Many established newspapers have moved largely, or fully, online and have to compete with countless news websites and blogs. In *True Enough: Learning to Live in a Post-Fact Society* journalist Farhad Manjoo, affirms that the invention of the Internet has radically altered and increased the possibility of the public’s participation. Access to the Internet provides billions with a platform on which to share their ideas. Furthermore, in the highly competitive contemporary mediascape the audience’s desires largely determine the content of newspapers, television and radio programmes and websites. In the age of the Internet, “the cost of ignoring customer preferences is much higher” than ever before (Nordenson). Manjoo notes the Internet’s “empowering” potential as it provides a platform for different voices and perspectives and “allows us to check on the elite” (112). Audiences are afforded ample

options of news sources and indeed become “prescriber[s]” as news sources have to meet their demands (Benjamin “Author” 225).

Nevertheless, the limitless availability of information has had complex effects on the public’s involvement. Although many use the Internet as a platform for their own writings, the consumption of information has become increasingly challenging. According to journalist Bree Nordenson “the information age is defined by output: we produce more information than we can possibly manage, let alone absorb”. The overwhelming availability of news has resulted in “news fatigue” and does not necessarily equate a better-informed public. Information often arrives in large quantities “of unrelated snippets” that confuse readers and increases their passivity rather than stimulates their involvement.

Furthermore, the increasing prevalence of the Internet halfway through the 1990s has resulted in the dissemination of news that is “more niche than ever before” in the Western world (Manjoo 16). Manjoo notes that the increasing competition has generated platforms that tailor specifically to political ideas of certain groups. Thus, people are given the choice of ideologically coloured new sources, such as television programmes, radio shows and websites, that offer radically different views or even “different realities” to their audiences (177). Many modern platforms are coloured by ideology and the desire to affirm the beliefs of their audience. Consequently, subjective interpretation is presented under the moniker of objectivity. Furthermore, Manjoo observes that in contemporary media “that slipperiest, gooiest of all media productions: personal opinion” finds a ready platform (161). He notes the current pervasiveness of “news with a point of view” which is blatantly biased, politically charged and fraught with sensationalism (171).

Thus, the modern man’s wish to “see his own interests expressed” in the media has also resulted in a mediascape in which readers increasingly choose to affirm their own ideas

often at the expense of critical judgement (Benjamin, “Author” 224). The relation to media has become increasingly complex. Capitalism has resulted in “hyperspecialization” and has left audiences feeling unable to navigate through all the information on topics beyond their comprehension (Manjoo 104). Yet, the audience’s role as participator has expanded due to the Internet and the competence in operating mass media has increased. In this sense, the transcendence of specialisation in relation to the media, which Benjamin hoped for, has been partially successful (“Author” 230). To an extent, authorship has indeed become “public property” as those with access to the Internet are able to assume the position of author (225). Yet, Manjoo notes that the overwhelming availability of information has also provided a need for expert figures who find a ready platform in modern media. Thus audiences again become dependent on an authoritarian figure who determines the meaning of information (Manjoo 105). Manjoo notes various instances that demonstrate the public’s reliance on experts and the role of experts in determining public opinion. The potentially divisive effects of mass media are also noted by Jürgen Habermas who attacks “the media for providing a pseudo-public sphere which distracts the laity from political action, being a sphere of public relations and passive spectatorship rather than genuine public debate” (Livingstone 10).

Social psychologist Sonia Livingstone responds to Habermas’ concerns pertaining to mass media by a reformulation of the public sphere in which the “fragmentary nature of the media” [...] could facilitate and legitimize the public negotiation—through compromise rather than consensus—of meanings among oppositional and marginalized groups” (Livingstone 10). The bourgeois public sphere, as discussed by Habermas, has often been criticised for its exclusion of various groups such as “women, people of color, the nonheterosexual, and the poor” which resulted in a limited debate (Kanouse 88). A mediated debate that includes various perspectives, as well as “representatives” of “political parties, special-interest groups,

pressure groups, charities and so forth” could involve audiences more directly in various facets of public debate (21).

Thus, Benjamin emphasised the manner in which the advent of mass media such as the newspaper and film challenged both the function of art and the involvement of the public. The issue of representation, in relation to both the image of the masses and their interests, underlies this discussion. Similar to popular radio which “not only mobilizes knowledge in the direction of the public, but mobilizes the public in the direction of knowledge” all mass media need to accommodate the public’s interest in order to reach a large audience (*Radio* 370). This entails that mass media, in order to reach enough listeners and readers, do not benefit from an exclusivist and elitist stance and, like radio, need to represent both the voices and the interests of the audience. The issue of the fragmentation of the media, which arose after Benjamin’s death, does not negate the involvement of the public. Yet, it raises questions as to the role of mass media in constituting a public sphere for meaningful, political debate. The lack of interaction between opposing views could function to obstruct political and societal change. Nevertheless, critics such as Livingstone cite the political potential of the fragmentary nature of media. These concerns, pertaining to community and group involvement in mass media, take different forms in different media.

4. Radio Communities

4.1 Radio in the United States

Radio's potential for audience participation was already noted by Benjamin in "Reflections on Radio" in which he criticised his contemporary broadcast hosts who confronted the "audience almost unchallenged" and failed to recognise radio as a platform to make "the public witness to interviews and conversations in which anyone might have a say" (*Radio* 363). In her discussion on radio in the United States, media critic and professor of Communication Studies Susan J. Douglas discusses additional forms of public engagement with the medium. Since radio's arrival in America in the early twentieth century, amateur radio operators, or hams, formed a subculture that played an important role in the advancement of broadcasting. They embodied an idealistic approach to radio as a platform for individuals, in addition to corporations, who are "allowed to transmit, to explore and to connect with one another" (330). Douglas discusses the hams as a subculture, with its own network and connections, which has nevertheless contributed to technological advancement. In addition, they played a role in various crises during which their "technical literacy" enabled communication and aid to cut-off communities (325).

Nevertheless, Douglas notes that most Americans are less involved in the technicalities of the medium. Their participation takes other forms. Douglas emphasises that radio's arrival in a largely visual culture, dominated by reading and viewing photography and films, functioned to stimulate listeners' imagination (28). Radio's lack of imagery enables the mind to conjure up its own images and increases cognitive participation (28). Indeed, others such as radio journalist Chris Brookes also emphasise that radio is a medium that, through its lack of visual input, stimulates the imagination. He emphasises that radio is therefore a storytelling medium instead of a medium for the dry conveyance of information. Indeed, since

the latter half of the 1920s, radio was often employed as a storytelling medium. In *Lost Sound* Jeff Porter, professor of English, notes that radio was a platform for drama, stories and the reading aloud of literature (3). Douglas argues that radio invites “dimensional listening” which stimulates listeners’ own cognitive input in supplying mental imagery to supplement what radio lacks (33). In fact, during radio’s early days, the medium itself stimulated the imagination of listeners and scientists alike. In the 1920s, radio’s introduction of an acousmatic, ethereal voice invited many to interpret it as a mystical apparatus that enabled a connection with the spiritual world (40–42).

Douglas notes that radio’s popularity in the 1920s both increased the withdrawal from public spaces and indicated a desire to belong to a group (65). Radio in fact “forever blurred the boundaries between the private domestic sphere and public, commercial, and political life” (9). In *Prosthetic Memories*, art historian Alison Landsberg notes that mass media such as television create a new, mediated public place. She argues that “the collective nature of the experience, a diverse audience viewing the same story simultaneously, made a new public sphere possible” (103). Landsberg prioritizes visual media, yet, as Kang observes, Benjamin already perceived “radio broadcasting as a possible mediated public sphere” decades before television became part of the household (14).

Over the course of the twentieth century, radio has allowed American audiences to feel involved in various historical moments. In fact, Douglas argues that radio was an important medium in engaging the public in various ways. For Americans, the Second World War was “a radio war” (Douglas 162). Radio broadcasting brought the events in Europe directly to the homes of Americans. The noises of the war, such as air-raid alarms, and the radio broadcasters played an important role in changing the minds of many American who had initially preferred to avoid American involvement (Douglas 197).

At the same time, Douglas notes that increasing corporate control of radio broadcasting in the second half of the twentieth century problematized the imaginative aspects of listeners' participation. During the Reagan administration, the Federal Communications Commission's control over radio diminished and it became largely part of the free market. As large corporations gained control over many radio stations, the stations' scope, like many television programmes, became increasingly narrow and aimed at niche audiences (325). Douglas notes that radio has always been a medium that facilitates "tribalism," or the formation of subgroups (57). Furthermore, the new, corporate conception of radio entailed the development of fixed formats that allowed for very little deviation. Radio became predictable and listeners listened to it in a more passive, unimaginative manner (285).

Yet, the lack of imagination in broadcasting and the lack of diversity in the voices both on the air and on television news generated a reconceptualization of radio in the 1980s. The corporate approach to radio generated a response by both talk radio and public radio networks such as National Public Radio (NPR) and Public Radio International (PRI) (Douglas 284). Although talk radio has a conservative approach and audience and public radio has a predominantly liberal audience, they both provide a platform for more in depth analysis and a "range of voices, some of them quite unwelcome elsewhere" (185)

4.2 Public Radio and *This American Life*

NPR responded to the standardisation of radio by a returning to a format that foregrounded sound and storytelling both in its news programmes such as *All Things Considered* and entertainment programmes. In its approach to news, "NPR revealed a preference for marginal stories, which fed its interest in pseudo-news radio genres, like commentaries, essays, and documentaries" (Porter 12). These programmes returned to the principles of the early days of

radio (Porter 12). Both Porter and Douglas note that NPR's inventive return to centralising sound effects differentiated its programming from other radio broadcasts. Porter claims that "NPR's producers had faith in the power of sound, without any voice-over explanation, to convey the larger meanings of the day" (194). During the decade after its first broadcast in 1971, and especially in the 1980s, NPR experimented with the possibilities for sound of the medium and borrowed characteristics, such as the choice to largely forego narration, from "cinema verité" (Porter 185).

NPR was a response to mainstream media's lack of diversity and focus on privileged speakers. It invited "'fresh' voices from outside the Beltway to supply the network with personal stories, reminiscences, and commentaries that reflected a broader slice of America" (Porter 188). Porter emphasises that NPR capitalised on radio's orality by inviting a multitude of regional accents and unique voices (189–90). The news programmes went out on the streets "exploring pedestrian situations and locales that spoke to broader cultural shifts and tensions" (Douglas 322).

This American Life, first broadcast in November 1995, adhered to the idealism of public radio (Glass, "First"). Its founder and host, Ira Glass, started his radio career on NPR's *All Things Considered* and notes that the "principles" of public radio inform *TAL*. In a 2014 interview with *The Guardian*, Glass notes that *TAL* adheres to the idealistic intention of public radio "to provide a perspective on the world you can't hear elsewhere, to bring you voices you would never hear anywhere else, to provide an analysis of the world you wouldn't get anywhere else" (Glass, "First"). During the first episode of *TAL*, Glass explained that "the idea of this show, this new little show, is stories, some by journalists and documentary producers, like myself, some just regular people telling their own little stories, some by artists, and writers, and performers of all different kinds. And the idea is we're going to bring you

stuff you're not going to find anywhere else" ("New Beginnings" 03:00). For *TAL*, the use of different voices is an important contributor to the programme's image. Over the course of almost six hundred episodes, countless voices have added to the diversity of the programme. Glass et al have realised that "it is in the interest of radio to bring anyone to the microphone at any opportunity" even to just say a single line (Benjamin 363). The endless supply of different voices is an important aspect of the continuous versatility of the programme and also evokes public radio's mission of inclusivity. In addition, Glass's voice and conversational speech are often cited as important assets to the programme. Benjamin already emphasised that for radio presentation and speech were as important as meaningful content. Glass' natural "nasal, stuttery" speech affirms his claim that in radio it is paramount to "talk like yourself" rather than adopt a radio voice (Gross).

TAL, a weekly hour-long programme, contains a format of several acts centring on one theme. As Glass explains, "Each week on our programme, of course, we choose a theme, invite a variety of writers and performers to tackle that theme with short stories, radio monologues, essays, the occasional radio play, whatever we can think of" ("Name" 27:00). The programme was initially called *Your Radio Playhouse*. The name alluded to *Pee-Wee's Playhouse*, "a place where people play, but it's also a stage. It's a double meaning" ("Name" 02:00). The name change was announced during the seventeenth episode and explained as resulting from confusion as to the programmes nature.

The shift to *This American Life*, bringing stories of "this, our American life" signals the primary focus of the programme ("New Year" 04:05). Although *TAL* is not a news programme, its basis is in journalism (Porter 192). The programme continues to branch out into radio drama ("The Radio Drama Episode"), poetry and fiction in the form of short stories. Nevertheless, it is, in the words of their producer Chicago Public Media "mostly true

stories of everyday people, plus the occasional piece of fiction or large investigative report” (“This American”). The producers of the programme subject their stories to the standards of “accurate, independent reporting” of public radio (“Retraction” 04:00). Nevertheless, the programme is often hailed as the instigator of the “new golden age” of “the personal narrative” on radio (Biewen). Indeed, in their web text on audience submissions, the staff explains that a successful submission “is a story in the most traditional sense” as “we do stories with a plot” (“Submissions”).

Furthermore, all episodes of the programme are available in the web archive since 1998 and in podcast form since 2006. Both online streaming and the podcast, “a syndicated audio broadcast that can be played on an MP3 player or computer,” allow listeners more freedom in their choice of listening (Farkas 28). This entails a different, less immediate, listening experience for those choosing the Internet version. Nevertheless, the radio version continues to attract 2.2 million listeners each week (“American”). In addition, the online availability of *TAL* facilitates a broader, world-wide listenership.

4.3 (Imagined) Communities

Ever since the early days of radio in the 1920’s, listeners and politicians have realised the potential of the medium for strengthening communal ties. Douglas notes that the increasing privatisation of life in the early twentieth century caused an increasing interest in the collective listening experience enabled by radio. The radio boom, starting in the 1920s, indicates a widespread longing for “participating in communication that was truly meaningful” (47).

Thus, radio was quickly promoted as a “nation building” medium (13)². Douglas notes that Benedict Anderson’s concept of “imagined communities” aptly conveys the potential of radio. Anderson’s discussion of the newspaper in its important role of creating a sense of the nation can be extended to radio (23). In addition, radio’s ability to reach a large group of listeners, in different geographical areas, simultaneously strengthens the sense of community and collective experience (24). Furthermore, radio enabled listeners to participate in important national moments such as political events. The possibility of listening to an event, as it was happening, along with the rest of the nation further interpolated listeners into a national identity and the sense of hearing national “history in the making” (24). Douglas notes that speech is part of the living present and this immediacy functions to generate a “common experience” (Douglas 29). The orality of the medium thus is an important factor in the generation of collective experiences and communal bonds.

Yet, radio’s potential to create a national community was also hindered by its potential to create subgroups. Douglas argues that radio was also one of the first media that organised communities based on consumerist “taste preference” (11). Radio quickly offered multiple and varied products for listeners to choose from. Therefore, as Douglas notes, radio promoted niche communities based around diversity within the nation (11). Nowadays, as Manjoo argues, the medium also functions to create communities organised around shared ideologies and political beliefs. Indeed, the differing ideologies of talk radio and NPR illustrate a political division. Talk radio presents conservative programming for an overwhelmingly

² In addition to broadcasting programmes from Europe to the United States, and within the United States, in 1942 *Voice of America*, “the nation’s largest and only global, publicly funded international broadcasting organization” was created to broadcast to Germany (Heil 2). *VOA* broadcasts initially functioned as a “propaganda organisation” (Gladstone 1:10) to counter German propaganda and function as “America’s town crier to the world” (3). *VOA* is currently active in 43 languages and exists on the fault line between protecting America’s interests, enhancing “national prestige” and providing impartial information (Heil 3; Gladstone 2:30).

conservative audience whereas NPR's liberal programming reaches a predominantly liberal audience.

Nevertheless, the oral nature of radio creates a new form of mediated intimacy, which enables the experience of a sense of community involving the other, imagined, listeners. Whereas reading creates distance, "sound envelops us" (Douglas 29). It brings what comes from afar very near and creates bonds between simultaneous listeners who would not naturally constitute a community based on physical proximity. In *TAL* Ira Glass often emphasises the intimacy of radio. In the episode "Radio," a meditation on the medium, Glass notes that it is "more personal" than other media (5). Its ephemeral nature is "part of what makes radio different from other media, I think. That quality where it can seem so small and fleeting" (03:30).

As the name, *This American Life*, already indicates, the programme focuses on "what's going on around the country, in these United States" ("Basketball" 02:40). Glass regularly stresses that a particular story is typically American. He often emphasises that a particular experience or character trait is quintessentially American in a humorous manner that invites listeners to partake in this experience and, ultimately, in this identity. In the episode "How to" Glass discusses the importance of driving to American culture whilst playing a tape recording of himself in a car teaching his co-narrator to drive:

Like there's a fundamental idea of what it is to be an American that is bound up in every hit-the-road song and movie and story that either of us have ever loved and probably you listening to my voice right now, in your car, listening to the radio that you also have loved, like, 'it's waiting out there like a killer in the sun. Just one more chance. We can make it if we run.' (26)

In this sense, he evokes a shared national identity that both pertains to the story he is narrating and the experience of the listeners thereby inviting them to recognise themselves, and identify as part of the same group. In “Basketball” Glass narrates stories taking place in Chicago, the home of *TAL*, about the Chicago Bulls. Yet, he discusses basketball in terms of “our national pastime” thereby drawing national listeners in whilst discussing one particular American community (4). Whilst being present and communicating directly with the Chicagoan ‘characters’ of the story, he evokes a national marker and invites those outside Chicago to recognise their common, American, interest.

Glass et al approach the programme’s aim to “document what’s going on around the country, in these United States” by narrating personal stories, often based on experiences in one community, and connecting them to larger issues (“Basketball” 02:40). Thus, *TAL* capitalises on radio’s potential for community building through an explicit focus on American communities. In creating their radio archive, they provided various ways of listening via contributor, date, location or tag. The latter options enable a choice of listening to stories pertaining to the topic, such as “neighbors/neighborhoods”. Furthermore, the Story Globe facilitates a choice of location by selecting an area on a map of the world. These listening options further “encourage community participation” (Codrea-rado). This again illustrates the manner in which the local and the national are combined in *TAL*. In addition, the web archive enables international listening and broadens the programme’s reach. Furthermore, Glass et al attempted to create an international listenership in their efforts to broadcast *TAL* on the BBC. Eventually, BBC Radio 4 Extra broadcast a selection of episodes.

The possibility of an international listenership has new implications for *TAL*’s representative function. Glass lamented the choice of name during the process of negotiation with the BBC as he noted that “you can tell we had no intention of being an international show. And there is no one in Britain who’s like, ‘you know what we don’t get enough of,

American culture” (“First”). The BBC’s concern with *TAL*’s name indicates some of the issues pertaining to its international listenership. In the contemporary “glocal,” or global and local, mediascape, listening communities are not necessarily bound by national borders (Smith 44). Nevertheless, *TAL*’s scope, of presenting stories of life in America, does function to address a particular community, albeit an imagined community of almost 319 million Americans. The radio version of the programme functions to represent this shared experience and identity back to Americans. International listeners are outside of the addressed community and this consequently also has implications for the manner in which the programme is received. This might entail resistance to a quintessentially American perspective, as illustrated by the issues with the BBC, or an uncritical acceptance of either the facts or the representations and perspectives that are presented.

Nevertheless, the fact that *TAL* is a storytelling programme often overshadows its political implications. Many international critics focus on the storytelling techniques and the suspense of the programme rather than on its representational, or political, content. Furthermore, given *TAL*’s focus on personal stories the programme’s representational function and political inclinations are not always explicit or pronounced. This indicates larger concerns for the contemporary prevalence of personal storytelling programmes.

5. The Politics of Personal Storytelling

5.1 Mass-Mediated Storytelling

The popularity of this *This American Life* is indicative of a widespread interest in personal stories. Radio is a medium that lends itself to providing a platform for different voices and the stories of different people. This is one aspect of this preference for personal stories in programmes such as *TAL*. Nevertheless, *TAL*'s approach is also indicative of an understanding of the nature and purpose of storytelling that extends beyond the medium of radio.

For Benjamin, the public's increasing proficiency in engaging with media such as the newspaper and their desire to see their own interests reflected constituted the "literarization of the conditions of living" (225). Kang explains that this concept denotes the fact that "the everyday lives of ordinary people are described, reported and presented to the public by means of newspaper" (57–8). Kang subsequently notes that Benjamin's discussion of the information industry can function to illustrate the manner in which ordinary people become "the active producers of information" and assume the role of "authors of their own lives in a media space equipped with ever more advanced communication technology, and the consumers of their own lives via social media" (64). Depicting the "everyday lives of ordinary people" has become central to audience participation in modern media (Kang 57–8). Social media are an example of the manner in which regular people depict their own lives by means of mass media.

Yet, according to oral historian Alexander Freund, the popularity of social media constitutes only one facet of the contemporary prevalence of "public autobiographical storytelling—talking about one's life in public" in the Western world (Freund 97). In *Reading Autobiography* Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson note that the practice of "personal

storytelling” pervades all media (124). Freund notes that the discourse surrounding storytelling in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century appears to conflate storytelling with personal narrative (98). Although the practice of autobiographical storytelling entails a representation of one’s own life and can be fully controlled by the person who is telling the story on platforms such as the Internet, other media have a more complex process in which control over the story remains top-down. As Kang notes, for Benjamin, the “one-way communication embedded in mass media” posed a threat to media’s subversive potential (148). Thus, personal storytelling remains connected to issues of representation and capitalist interests. Benjamin proposed a reconceptualization of the function of both the author and the work in relation to new media. As the practice of storytelling has been appropriated, at least in name, by contemporary mass media and the information industry, the questions he asked arise again in relation to the function of mediated storytelling.

Although, as Freund notes, the storytelling hype remains rather undefined by critics and scholars, he argues that the “centuries-long history of confessional and psychologizing interviewing practices that inform self-monitoring and self-reporting” form the basis of the current prevalence personal storytelling (97). Nevertheless, he argues that the apparent conflation of storytelling with personal storytelling has its roots in the 1970s during which “therapy culture” and “the self-help movement” generated a particular perspective on the function and meaning of storytelling (121–2). Indeed, Smith and Watson also note that the prevalence of personal storytelling partially results from “the contemporary culture of self-help” (124). Freund observes that storytelling is now presented as an answer to many questions and a solution to many problems. Storytelling “is a new mass creed that makes people believe in storytelling as a panacea for all the ills of the world and their own lives” (103). Freund argues that the fact that the storytelling hype is connected to the self-help movement colours the perception of the purpose and meaning of storytelling.

Although “the Western mass confessional practice of public storytelling” is not completely dependent on mass media, as demonstrated by storytelling events and festivals, it is nevertheless largely intertwined with, and perpetuated by, media (Freund 130). Personal narratives are “modelled and replicated in popular news media, including newspapers, magazines, radio and television, online platforms, and fundraising campaigns” (Freund 100—1). According to Freund, media function to naturalise the practice of personal storytelling for ordinary people in contemporary society (101).

Freund argues that “the difference from earlier periods is that everyone now wants to ‘do’ storytelling” (103). Media such as the internet facilitate this practice to an extent. Yet, top-down storytelling programmes such as *This American Life*, *The Moth* and *StoryCorps* have a broad reach and are consequentially influential. These programmes are, to a differing extent, all a combination of journalism or nonfiction and storytelling. Indeed, the current storytelling hype generally entails that the stories are true in the sense that they are factually accurate. Although, such programmes have been interpreted as a reaction to the ephemeral and fragmented nature of information, they are nevertheless largely constrained by the principles of journalism (Nordenson). This interpretation of storytelling, as directly representational of the real world, differs from a Benjaminian interpretation which emphasises wisdom, or “the epic side of truth” (87). Although both are concerned with the “communicability of experiences,” the manner in which experience is communicated, and the constraints on the storyteller, differs (Benjamin, “Storyteller” 86). Nevertheless, the perspective that “narrative ‘gets to us’ in ways that other things don’t” and is a means to reach bigger truths continues to underpin the perspective and discourse on storytelling (Glass qtd. in Tumarkin).

Thus, contemporary mediated storytelling raises new questions as to this practice’s political implications. As Freund claims, the view of storytelling as an essentially human

practice combined with the dominance of personal narratives can also be interpreted as a nostalgic escape from political reality. A focus on personal lives that neglects historical and social contexts, whilst claiming to depict reality, can function to disguise the political contexts that influences such lives (124). The fusion of the truth claims of journalism with narratives of personal experience can consequently function to naturalise and perpetuate ideological notions of society and selfhood (111). The supposedly “healing” function of the experience of storytelling, as contingent on the culture of self-help, would then mask the real historical causes of the issues encountered in personal lives (124–5). Similarly, Freund illustrates that a timeless view of the practice of storytelling itself precludes an understanding of the specificities of the current storytelling movement.

Freund discusses NPR programmes in their aim and function of representing the nation. As an oral historian, he is particularly concerned with *StoryCorps*, which presents itself as an archive of oral histories. He argues that the contemporary choice of personal storytelling, whilst supposedly providing an image of the community, essentially, perhaps inadvertently, promotes the “neoliberal individualism” out of which the storytelling hype arose (132). Personal stories would then function to mask the historical and political influence on these personal lives and hardly provide an image of the community as it is. Freund notes that these types of narratives neglect Karl Marx’s “historical insight that individuals think and act [...] ‘under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past’” (124). Freund’s discussion of the storytelling hype raises questions as to the current belief that personal narratives are the most suitable means to discuss larger issues and generate political participation and change.

The contemporary prevalence of life narratives and the culture of sharing personal experiences is part of a larger shift in Western understanding of private and public. As Freund observed, the storytelling hype arose out of movements during the 1970s. Yet, the preference

of personal interaction over impersonal public life has a longer history according to sociologist Richard Sennett. In *The Fall of Public Man*, Sennett discusses the gradual shift away from “a balance between public and private life, a balance between an impersonal realm in which men could invest one kind of passion and a personal realm in which they could invest another” towards the contemporary preference for intimacy and the antipathy towards the impersonal (338). In his 1977 book, Sennett argues “public life” changed in various ways during the nineteenth century (6). He identifies processes of secularism and increasing industrial capitalism as the predominant forces that altered the public realm (259). Capitalism generated various changes to the impersonal public sphere. The overwhelming experience of life in the city during the nineteenth century was partially due to the dependence on a new “economic order” that people failed to truly understand (19). He argues that the changed experience of life in the city incited people to escape into family life at the expense of public life (19–20).

Furthermore, the increasing secularisation of society generated a new mode of understanding the world. Nineteenth century secularism “was based on a code of the immanent, rather than the transcendent. Immediate sensation, immediate fact, immediate feeling, were no longer to be fitted into a pre-existent scheme in order to be understood” (21). The focus on the immanent world, in addition to the loss of spaces of impersonal interaction and the escape into the private life of the family resulted in an understanding of the private and personal as superior to the impersonal (22).

Sennett argues that impersonal interaction gradually came to be perceived as inauthentic. Furthermore, the arrival of psychology promoted a psychological worldview which perceives the “individual self and its authenticity as the key value, the meaning of life” (Musial 120). Maciej Musial notes that in Sennett’s discussion of the modern way of life “anything not directly connected to one’s self is not considered interesting or important.

Therefore, public problems are perceived as useless and irrelevant as long as they do not become directly connected with personality of a particular individual. Consequently, issues do not exist as long as they are not the personal ones” (120). Subsequently, “the public sphere becomes disintegrated as a place that contains problems disconnected from personal issues and, as a consequence, generally irrelevant” (Musial 121).

Sennett emphasises the loss of impersonal contact as, for him, this entails a loss of civility (6). He argues that “wearing a mask is the essence of civility. Masks permit pure sociability, detached from the circumstances of power, malaise, and private feeling of those who wear them” (264). He claims that “codes of impersonal meaning” are conducive to social and political change (5). For Sennett, the modern focus on authentic experience, as connected to one’s personal feelings, precludes political involvement.

Although Sennett provides a rather pessimistic, and arguably limited, account of public life in the modern era, he does provide insight into the current preference for a personal perspective of public affairs. Furthermore, he raises questions as to the concerns connected to this perspective and the changing nature of involvement in public life. Sennett also observes that social class, “passed through the filter of personality” has come to be understood as dependent on personality and social mobility is perceived as dependent fully on personal merit (330). The lack of a clear division between the personal and impersonal is also noted by social philosopher André Gorz in relation to the knowledge economy, or cognitive capitalism, of the late twentieth- and early twenty-first century. He argues that the knowledge economy increasingly revolves around “the subsumption of the whole person and the whole of life by capital, with which everyone identifies entirely” (24). In his discussion of cognitive capitalism, Gorz argues that issues such as unemployment are consequently perceived as both a personal responsibility and contingent upon one’s personhood (25). Gorz’s observations

again evoke concerns with a lack of separation between personal- and public life and the manner in which this affects our understanding of our socio-political context.

In his discussion of the internalisation of the individualistic values of neoliberal capitalism Freund furthermore notes that notions of “personal responsibility” and individualism have gained a particular status in the United States as essentially American virtues (117). Smith and Watson note that in the United States personal narratives have a long history of constituting national character and identity (115). During the 18th century, “self-writing became self-making” as settlers had to formulate a shared national identity as well as start a new life on another continent (116). Values of entrepreneurship and the “self-made man” (116) were disseminated by means of autobiographical narratives and functioned as an important model “of identity culturally available in the United States” (39). Thus, there existed a mutual influence between images of the self that came to be understood as national values and the incorporation of these values in subsequent life narratives of Americans.

Freund furthermore argues that this notion of personal responsibility was adopted by positive psychology and the self-help movement of the 1970s. He argues that these movements both emphasise the possibility of changing one’s life and consequently ultimately further the belief that failure and the lack of social mobility are personal rather than dependent of outside forces. As the practice of personal storytelling is contingent on these movements, the concern arises that contemporary narratives could function to perpetuate the notion of personal accountability and a lack of insight into the fact that ‘the personal is political’.

5.2 The Aura of Storytelling

The decision to approach real events by means of storytelling also raises several concerns.

Walter Benjamin’s discussion of storytelling focused on this practice as a means to provide a

profound wisdom that was lacking in other forms of communication. Similar interpretations of the value of storytelling are an important part of the current popularity of approaching the world by means of the story. In “This Narrated Life” Maria Tumarkin discusses the contemporary view that storytelling defines humanity and is a means to reach universally human truths. Tumarkin cites Ira Glass’ claim that storytelling functions as “the back door into the deepest parts of us not accessible in other ways. Its power is not explicable to rational analysis, it is far more animal, far deeper, far more pre-rational. Narrative ‘gets to us’ in ways that other things don’t”. Tumarkin responds that storytelling “does not in itself or *by itself* take us closer to the truths of our lives with anything like the inevitability that gets ascribed to it these days”. Tumarkin’s concern is connected to the fact that storytelling is used as a means to reflect on the real world. The distance of storytelling, as described by Benjamin, is lost in forms of storytelling that focus on “get[ting] closer to things” and entail new different political implications (“Work” 23). Programmes such as *TAL* do not build on tradition. Instead they are concerned with the present or “stories of people in the middle of big experiences, whose lives are going through some sort of change, some growth, or some crisis” (Glass, “What” 03:22).

These concerns are connected to the format of storytelling programmes such as *StoryCorps* and *This American Life*. Tumarkin criticises *TAL* for “the way the form pushes itself onto the experience”. As Ira Glass often claims, the two main prerequisites for a suitable story are an interesting sequence of events and a moment of critical insight or reflection (“Harnessing”). In “The Radio Drama Episode” Glass cites the influence of musicals on his concept of storytelling as “they’re funny at the beginning. And then there’s something really emotional. And they’re about some bigger idea. They take you into their world” (20:30).

Critics such as Tumarkin and Eugenia Williamson argue that *TAL*’s format, which requires a transcendent moment of insight, can function to trivialise the concerns that such

stories claim to address (“Submissions”). The fact that the programme’s producers often decide the “bigger idea” of a story prior to investigating and reporting on the events, raises questions as to the tension between providing a platform for every day voices and the requirements of storytelling to transcend the particulars of these experiences to provide either an American, or a quintessentially human story (Glass, “Radio” 02:30; Glass, “Harnessing”).

For Tumarkin and Williamson, the scandal following the 2012 episode “Mr Daisey and the Apple Factory,” an episode in which dramatic monologist Daisey fabricated parts of his monologue about visiting Apple factories in China, illustrates the problem of imposing the requirements of *TAL*’s format storytelling onto complex real events.³ Williamson claims that “Daisey exposed the fact that the aesthetics and conventions of the kind of narrative journey Glass has patented—one born of nineties boom-time decadence—were never designed to accommodate harsh economic truths, much less to promote any kind of critical art or intelligence.” For Williamson, “the show’s habit of massaging painful realities into puddles of personal experience” and “its preference for pathos over tragedy” constitute the issues of coupling complex political and economic topics with a ready-made format that requires raising “some bigger question or issue, some universal thing to think about” (“Submissions”).

³ The episode was based on Mike Daisey’s monologue *The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs*. This episode of the programme was later retracted as Daisey had lied about the ages of the workers he encountered and meeting workers whose health had been affected by exposure to n-hexane. He exaggerated several other details (such as the number of workers he met and the ages of child workers) of his monologue. The original episode remains available solely in transcript form in the web archive. The programme devoted an entire episode called “Retraction” to the scandal in which both Glass and *Marketplace*’s Rob Schmitz discussed the inaccuracies with Daisey. The scandal generated criticism by journalists such as Lawrence Pintak and Solomon Christopher who criticise *TAL*’s failure to verify Daisey’s claims and the episode’s impact on the credibility of journalism. Others discussed the fundamental flaws in *TAL*’s fact-checking progress (Silverman). Like Williamson, Solomon notes that Daisey’s fabrication of minor details of his own experience in China detracts from the larger concerns of the working conditions of Apple suppliers in China.

5.3 “The Facts Don’t Matter”

Despite universal or transcendent aspirations, the epiphanies that are achieved in *TAL* are bound to truth-claims about society. In the increasingly fragmented mediascape, as discussed by Manjoo, the choice of topic, experts and subsequent moment of insight are inherently political. For instance, the 2013 episode “Trends With Benefits,” was criticised by attorney Jennifer Kates for a partisan choice of facts and experts and biased framing which illustrated “that fabrications are not the only untruths that need to be guarded against” (“No Such” IV). The episode, which was researched and narrated by *Planet Money*’s Chana Joffe-Walt, is concerned with the notion that a large number of those receiving disability benefits might actually simply lack “the education or the skills for the current economy” (54:30). Joffe-Walt discussion pertains to Hale County in Alabama yet she claims that this is a national problem which hides aspects of the issue of unemployment in the United States. Kates argues that the episode is a misrepresentation that “repackaged talking points from think tanks with radical proposals to restructure the country’s disability benefits program” and offers an inaccurate and biased perspective due to selective choice of experts (Kates, “NPR”).⁴

Critics such as Kates and Pollard also cite Joffe-Walt’s conversation with a child whose family receives benefits for his learning ability as particularly misguided. Joffe-Walt interviews a child about his favourite school subjects and subsequently recounts the benefits his mother receives for keeping him on the disability programme. She concludes that “Jaleel is a kid you can imagine doing very well for himself. He is delayed. But given the right circumstances and support, it’s easy to see that over the course of his schooling, Jaleel could catch up. School’s his favourite thing to go to” (49:55). She furthermore makes the particularly poignant claim that many American children are suffering due to the current

⁴ This episode was discussed on the website of Dutch newspaper *NRC*. The facts of the episode were uncritically accepted. This speaks to both the global reach of programmes such as *TAL* and *Planet Money* and manner in which the reporting is perceived to be representative and accepted at face value (See Zantingh).

disability system as their parents discourage them from succeeding in school in order to receive their disability benefits (Kates, “No” III). She notes that many of those children later stay on a “programme that penalises you if you start to do well in school or if you start to work as a grownup” (51:50). In her concluding remarks, Joffe-Walt’s asserts that the current disability system stands in direct opposition to the universal desire to see children thrive and succeed. Both the narrative structure of these segments and the casual insinuation “that this appealing, gap-toothed, and enthusiastic kid has nothing fundamentally wrong with him” and is rather a victim of the current system function to undermine the disability programme (Pollack).⁵ It could thus be argued that the most poignant ‘truth’ of the episode, that the United States needs to provide a better system to serve the needs of its children, functions to push a particular political agenda (Kates III).⁶

The controversy surrounding this episode raises larger concerns pertaining to the “framing” of stories or the manner in which facts are selected and adapted to a particular perspective (Kates, “No” IV). In *True Enough*, Manjoo observes the complexities of “low-feedback” topics for which “the truth is simply elusive, and a news organization can freely shoehorn the facts into a package that fits an audience’s view” (177). Although “Trends With Benefits” was researched and narrated by *Planet Money*’s Joffe-Walt, according to Williamson, the “right-wing” interpretation presented in the episode is not necessarily atypical of *TAL* in spite of its predominantly liberal audience (Williamson, “Ira”)⁷. She argues that the narratives of *TAL* are often assimilated to a perspective that appeases its affluent

⁵ In addition to the criticism that Joffe-Walt’s drew conclusions based on brief conversations, law professor James Kwak argued that the episode suffered from “facile extrapolation from the individual story to national policy.” Similarly, Kates argues that one community cannot represent the nation on this issue (“No” I).

⁶ Kates also discusses *Planet Money*’s funding by the Lincoln Financial Group which provides “disability insurance” and would benefit from the favourable stance towards privatisation of Joffe-Walt’s sources (“NPR”).

⁷ Kates also points out the controversy surrounding *Planet Money*’s Adam Davidson’s partisan views and additional issues with the programme’s funding (See for instance Foster Kamer or Yasha Levine).

middle class listener. She claims that most stories concern the lives of this class and that stories pertaining to poverty are inevitably assimilated under the guise of the universal insight gained over the course of the narrative.

Nordenson views *TAL* as a response to the immense amount of available information. Stories can guide listeners through an overwhelming amount of data. Yet, stories are also already an interpretation of the facts and are coloured by a particular perspective. As Tumarkin noted, storytelling does not automatically or necessarily reach deeper truths yet it does make information seem more truthful. Nevertheless, it should be noted that various episodes of *TAL* also have a more open-ended, inquisitive format. In the episode “The Facts Don’t Matter” (2004) the techniques of personal storytelling, and the three-act format, are used to address the implications of the contemporary division of political perspectives to the point of differing realities as has also been discussed by critics such as Manjoo. In his discussion of the implications of a Congressional bill to raise FCC fines, Glass argues that,

On this issue and on most issues, we're never going to have a meeting of the minds because we don't even agree what the issue is. Is it First Amendment rights? Or is it children's innocence? Is gay marriage a question of the Bible or of equal rights under the Constitution? Iraq, the deficit, in the end, because we don't agree on what the issue is, the facts don't matter (5:30)

The subsequent acts both pertain to stories that illustrate that for many issues “it all comes down to how you frame what the issue [is]” (02:30). This episode addresses the implications of a contemporary societal issue in a less decisive manner than the episodes that Williamson discusses.

For Sennett, mass media solely held negative implications as they promoted a pre-existing predilection for the personal at the expense of an impersonal public sphere. Episodes

such as “The Facts Don’t Matter” combine methods of personal storytelling and a focus on personal voices and opinions to address larger concerns. They can be seen as a hybrid of personal and impersonal concerns. In the second act entitled “Straight Eyes on the Quirin Guys” Glass discusses a 1942 Supreme Court case which set the precedent that, during times of war, “enemies captured on US soil should be tried in military courts” (40:50). The events of this case are partially narrated by a friend of one of the executed saboteurs as well as reporters and various people who were involved in the case. They address the implications of this case for military tribunals under the Bush Administration. Such episodes, which combine the use of verifiable court documents and multiple, diverging first-person perspectives by those directly involved with the case, illustrate the potential of programmes such as *TAL* in a “mediated public sphere” (Kang 14).

Similarly, in the two-part episode “Cops See It Differently” Glass et al discuss the issue of police racism and brutality. They approach the issue by visiting several communities, rather than one community as they did in “Trends With Benefits,” to illustrate that the issue is multi-faceted and takes on different forms in different communities. The producers discuss the issues in the communities with both civilians and police officers or “representatives” (Livingstone 21). Although the format of *TAL* does not facilitate a debate in the traditional sense, it is capable of functioning as a platform to discuss both the perspective, or rather perspectives, of the public and the point of view of the police. Williamson’s scathing claim that *TAL*’s “narrative journey” does not “promote any kind of critical art or intelligence” can be nuanced as the format also lends itself to a juxtaposition of multiple, differing experiences and perspectives.

5.4 The Potential of Personal Storytelling

Benjamin was early to notice the “counter-hegemonic” potential of mass media (Kang 63). Landsberg adds that the dissemination of personal narratives by means of mass media can entail the “production of potentially counterhegemonic public spheres” (Kang 63; Landsberg 21). She argues that the mass media’s ability to disseminate personal narratives on a large scale can function to challenge biases and generate political involvement. For Landsberg the dissemination of personal narratives by means of the mass media invites “ethical thinking” (9). She argues that the “racial and economic segregation” of communities can be overcome by means of the mass media (103). For Landsberg, the widespread dissemination of films and television programmes pertaining to personal memories or stories can function to bridge the gap between communities that would be less likely to encounter each other’s perspectives in the real world. The fact that media enable the formation of new communities, no longer based on “ancestral inheritance or ‘heritage,’” can imply a greater understanding between communities that are segregated in the world (100).

Richard Sennett argued that the “erosion of public life” generated a renewed interest in local communities based on sameness (6). Landsberg argues that these natural communities can be transcended by means of mass mediated personal stories. She argues that an encounter with experiences that are not part of one’s own life can stimulate “ethical thinking” as such experiences will evoke an empathic response in viewers or listeners (9). Personal storytelling, which some critics interpret as escapism from politics, could then instead raise a political awareness in the audience (142–3). Landsberg stresses the combination of affect and cognitive understanding for “ethical thinking” (9). She views the emotional appeal of personal stories, which is often dismissed as manipulative, as an important factor in increasing empathy and understanding. The sensory experience of mass media increases the impact of personal stories. Although Landsberg focusses on visual media, she nevertheless emphasises

the role of listening to testimonies in constructing “a memory triggered by the testimony that also is closely connected to our own archive of experience” (137). She emphasises that personal narratives will encourage listeners to assimilate these experiences into their own memories and construct a unique perspective in each listener (136–7). Paramount to these claims is of course the fact that such diverse narratives would have to reach a broad audience. Manjoo and Douglas have noted the fragmentation of communities along political lines in the contemporary mediascape. Yet, films reach a broader audience than politically-oriented news programmes. The formation of new mediated communities challenges communities that exist in the world and increases the likelihood of encountering diversity along different lines.

Landsberg approaches the mass-mediated distribution of personal narratives as a potentially positive phenomenon. Both visual and aural media could be employed to generate ethical thinking. Her claims that traditional communities are challenged by mass mediated personal storytelling is relevant for *TAL* which employs radio’s community building potential to question certain conventions. The practice of personal storytelling to discuss life in the United States has a specific tradition. Whereas Freund sees *StoryCorps* as a platform that perpetuates national myths of selfhood, *TAL* also functions to question these myths. Although Glass often evokes the individualistic, supposedly American, experience of following your dream or “the move westward” (“Name Change” 10:40), the “birth right that we can recreate ourselves as someone who we prefer to be” (“Twentieth” 00:30) the “truly American story” of trying against all odds (“Rich” 03:50), he generally emphasises the fact that this is a myth ingrained in American culture. That it is a belief rather than a fact of life.

For instance, the 1999 episode “Twentieth Century Man” discusses the life of Keith Aldrich from the perspective of his daughter. Glass notes the prevalence of this myth in American popular culture and connects it to the self-help movement. The episode subsequently functions to question “this part of the national character” (01:30). Gillian

Aldrich, the episode's narrator, notes the detrimental effects of the fact that her father's "dreams weren't even his own, but second-hand dreams borrowed from American popular culture [...]. It seemed that he couldn't separate the fantasy of these public myths from real life" (52:30). Although the episode is not designated to condemn the American dream, it does raise questions as to its role in the cultural heritage of the United States.

In addition, the problematic history of personal narratives of the self-made man, which has a long exclusivist tradition of favouring the "white, propertied, and socially and politically enfranchised" man is undermined in episodes such as "Living the Dream" (2001). In this episode, the exclusivist nature of the American dream is challenged as it is discussed in the context of a group of transgender Latin youths. The episode broadens the scope of a problematic, exclusivist myth to reformulate the American identity as more inclusive.

Both episodes engage with national identity by means of personal storytelling. In these instances, *TAL* functions as a site on which the community building characteristics of the medium and the nation building aspects of the self-made man narrative are employed to question the traditional understanding of the American spirit and nation. These examples do not align precisely with Landsberg's account of prosthetic memories, nor are they the kind of political debate that Livingstone discusses. Nevertheless, they employ *TAL*'s storytelling format and the properties of its medium to challenge values that have been naturalised in American culture and engage with the tradition of life narratives in a meaningful way.

For Benjamin, progressive artists use mass media in ways that challenge the audience. Mass media are able to accommodate the audience's desire to "get closer to things" and can be employed to make audiences question the status quo of their society ("Work" 23). The desire to get closer to things also underpins the information industry. *TAL* and similar programmes do not necessarily aim to change society. Nevertheless, they can function to

represent the public in a subversive manner by critically engaging with national myths. By representing personal narratives that were historically excluded from the image of the American identity as valid American experiences, such programmes can function to question the tradition of American life narratives out of which the programme originally arose.

6. Conclusion

In his essays on media, such as “The Author as Producer,” Walter Benjamin prioritised the function of mediated art and literature over notions of aesthetic value. He discussed the manner in which artists either affirmed or challenged the status quo in society. The fact that mass media enabled involvement of the public and a closer understanding of the conditions of society lend them their political relevance. Nevertheless, Benjamin also praised the distance of the storytelling tradition and the wisdom that he perceived to be a unique characteristic of storytelling. This indicates a schism in his writings on media and his essay on storytelling.

Following Benjamin, critics have often either affirmed that storytelling is indeed lost in contemporary society or attempted to disprove this claim. Although “The Storyteller” has not been discussed in relation to the contemporary storytelling hype, critics have emphasised his claim that information and storytelling are antithetical.⁸ This thesis has not attempted to intervene in the debate on the true characteristics of storytelling, it has instead approached the current prevalence of storytelling programmes by concerning itself with the manner in which *This American Life* functions as a storytelling programme in the contemporary fragmented mediascape. Although Benjamin clearly separated storytelling from information and mass media, it is nevertheless apparent that media are currently flooded with storytelling programmes. To retain a firm dichotomy of storytelling and information would preclude an understanding of the impact and political potential of this popular phenomenon.

Therefore, this thesis has discussed *TAL* both in relation to the information industry and in relation to the implications of storytelling. It has furthermore discussed the characteristics of the medium in relation to *TAL*. The programme is part of a tradition of

⁸ For instance, Joan Scott states that “for Walter Benjamin, the transmission of information has nothing to do with the art of storytelling, even if its presentation takes narrative form” (204).

public radio to provide a platform for marginalised voices and stories. In the context of mainstream radio, such programmes had a subversive function. Yet, critics such as Williamson illuminate that storytelling's transcendent aspirations can also undermine the political idealism of public radio. Williamson and others argue that storytelling can also function to reassure listeners and find a meaning and closure that is not necessarily warranted by the events that are discussed.

In addition, following Benjamin, it can be observed that *TAL*'s aim to get closer to things is problematized by the current overwhelming availability of information. Critics such as Nordenson view *TAL* as a suitable response to the fragmented mediascape. Yet, *TAL* is also part of this mediascape regardless of its nature as a storytelling programme. Although "Trends With Benefits" was largely a *Planet Money* production, this episode nevertheless indicates larger concerns arising out of the combination of storytelling and information. The profundity and aura of truth surrounding storytelling, as discussed by Benjamin, has not diminished despite the advent of mediated nonfiction storytelling. Facts are easily accepted if they are provided in the form of a compelling story. This is an important concern in the contemporary fragmented mediascape. This arguably evokes a common thread underpinning Benjamin's otherwise somewhat disconnected media works and "The Storyteller". For Benjamin, both mass media and storytelling would ideally function to incite critical thought in the audience. Mass media could function to raise awareness of the conditions of society whereas storytelling ideally incites the audience to adopt a critical mind-set and perspective of the world. The fear of certain critics of *TAL* appears to be that the programme fails in this respect as it induces listeners to adopt a particular, politically charged, worldview based on a biased assimilation of facts.

Nevertheless, this thesis has also attempted to present a more hopeful understanding of storytelling in the contemporary mediascape. It has discussed Landsberg's view of personal

storytelling and provided a discussion of several episodes of *TAL* that illustrates a more inclusive perspective of America and the manner in which the properties of the medium are used to achieve this aim.

This thesis has provided a preliminary and exploratory discussion of *TAL* in the context of the concerns surrounding personal storytelling programmes. Future research projects could compare several storytelling programmes, such as *StoryCorps* and *The Moth*, in relation to the concerns pertaining to personal storytelling in a fragmented mediascape. Such projects might draw on Alexander Freund's concerns pertaining to the values that underpin the storytelling hype and examine the manner in which the political context of personal narratives is presented. In addition, a further discussion of *TAL* might focus on particular tags, such as "immigration" or "politics" in order to analyse the manner in which these topics are addressed. They might furthermore examine the manner in which closure is achieved in episodes that discuss contemporary societal concerns.

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