

5 CONTENT IS KING

Interviews with Arthur Sulzberger Jr., Alice Rawsthorn, Ira Glass,
and Colin Callender



People sort of take it for granted, but the more you see of the media world ... the more you appreciate a paper like the *New York Times*, where its family continues to invest in editorial quality. I think it truly is the best paper in the world.

David Talbot, American journalist, founder of Salon.com

THE PEOPLE INTERVIEWED for this chapter believe passionately in the ability of their content to transcend the medium. You can tell in the interview that follows that Arthur Sulzberger Jr. believes first in high-quality journalism. Indeed, he feels that it is journalism's mission to give people the information they need to keep democracy alive. He is confident that the print version of the newspaper is here to stay. At the same time he welcomes additional media that give opportunities to tell stories in other ways, allowing the same content to reach more people with video, audio, slide shows, and, as he puts it, "all of these things that have become so wonderful" on the Web. While content may be king, there is evidently a financial struggle in progress. As publisher and chairman of the board of the New York Times Company, Sulzberger faces falling advertising revenues, a deep recession, and overhead costs that must be hard to reduce, as they consist of an excellent journalistic and editorial staff in addition to an elegant headquarters building.

Alice Rawsthorn has a direct link to the *New York Times* as a columnist for the magazine. She is also the design critic of the *International Herald Tribune*. She has read the *New York Times* Web site every day for more than ten years but no longer enjoys the print version, so she communicates enthusiasm for the content in the new medium. As a newspaper journalist based in London, she has lived through more than one revolution in the industry. In her interview she describes the changes that she has experienced and revels in the access to rich content that is increasingly enabled by new technologies.

"The laws of narrative are still the laws of narrative, and what engages us is simply what engages us. I feel like those things still apply in the new digital world!" says Ira Glass, summarizing his belief that content

← Newspapers
photo by Jane M. Sawyer/Morgue File

is king in the world of radio. He has been creating engaging radio for more than three decades and has hosted *This American Life* since it started in 1995. He thinks that the Web is more like radio than most media since the Internet and radio share a form of intimacy. He has recently experimented with a television version of *This American Life*, discovering that there are differences in the design approaches that work well for the two media, but he looks first for the stories about people that will be interesting anywhere.

Colin Callender has produced innovative films throughout his career. From 1987 to 2008 he served as executive producer of HBO Showcase. He believes that the best film and television does more than entertain: it illuminates, informs, and engages emotionally. “At its very best, as any great art does, it enables the person viewing to look at the world with slightly different eyes, with a different perspective, with a different point of view—and maybe have a new empathy for other people,” he says. Colin is confident that people will continue to enjoy watching entertainment on screens in their homes and that the content will be what matters, whether the image is on a computer screen, a computer-television linkage, or something that is carried around, such as a laptop, tablet, or smart phone.

ARTHUR SULZBERGER JR.

Interviewed November 14, 2008



← Arthur Sulzberger Jr.
photos by author

ARTHUR SULZBERGER JR.

Arthur Sulzberger Jr. became the publisher of the *New York Times* in 1992 and chairman of the board of its owner, the New York Times Company, in 1997, succeeding his father, Arthur Ochs Sulzberger. After studying at Tufts University, Arthur Jr. gained experience as a journalist in North Carolina and London before joining the *New York Times* in 1978 as a correspondent in its Washington bureau. He moved to New York as a metro reporter in 1981 and was appointed assistant metro editor later that year. During the eighties he gained experience in a wide range of departments of the organization, becoming deputy publisher in 1988, overseeing the news and business departments. Arthur played a central role in the development of the Times Square Business Improvement District, serving as the first chairman. He is at the head of one of the most influential newspapers in the world, as well as its holding company, which owns the *International Herald Tribune*, fifteen regional papers, approximately thirty-five Web sites, nine television stations, and two radio stations.

I interviewed David Liddle for *Designing Interactions* and heard that he serves on the board of the New York Times Company, so I asked if he could help me make a connection to Arthur Sulzberger Jr. With David's assistance and advice, my interview was soon arranged. Catherine Mathis, senior vice president of corporate communications, works very closely with Arthur, and I corresponded with her in advance, so that she could help him prepare. I arrived at his offices on a wet November morning, setting up my cameras in his airy office high above the streets of Manhattan. He was gracious and hospitable, talking openly about his philosophy and values, occasionally turning to Catherine for help in recalling names and dates.



← Reading the *New York Times*
photo by Nicolas Zurcher

THE *NEW YORK TIMES*

The Times Square area takes its name from the presence of the *New York Times* building between 1904 and 1913. It was a hub for theater and entertainment as well as the annual New Year's Eve ball drop, but it became a dangerous neighborhood after the Great Depression, known for decades as a seedy center for adult entertainment. Arthur Sulzberger Jr. was instrumental in planning improvements in the area, serving as chairman of the organization that resuscitated the neighborhood, and pioneering the construction of a new fifty-two-story tower that has housed the *New York Times* since its completion in 2007. The tower was elegantly designed by the Italian architect Renzo Piano.

Arthur sits in his beautifully appointed office looking out over Manhattan through windows on two sides, with light controlled by adjustable blinds with a hint of transparency. Framed copies of the paper adorn the walls, highlighting significant historical moments, including a spread bearing the news of Lincoln's assassination. On the low table in front of his chair are several copies of the paper from November 5, 2008, the morning after the election of President Obama. The front page has a large image of Obama and his family, with his name in huge type and a subhead saying, "RACIAL BARRIER FALLS IN DECISIVE VICTORY." This issue has become a collector's item, even though more than 200,000 extra copies were printed. Arthur picks it up and says,

I think the most powerful story in this paper was this, and I'd like to read you the first graph if I might. Ethan Bronner (who is our Middle East correspondent) writing out of Gaza, wrote this: "From far away this is how it looks. There is a country out there where tens of millions of white Christians, voting freely, select as their leader a black man of modest origins, the son of a Muslim. There is a place on earth, call it America, where such a thing happens!" That's pretty powerful. It brought tears to my eyes when I first read it.

Arthur believes that content is king! He asserts that the first principle for a newspaper is to aggregate a quality audience through quality journalism; the principles of journalism should be defined by honesty in reporting, thoroughness, acknowledgment of mistakes, and correction of those mistakes. He is optimistic about the future of the print version of the newspaper, in spite of the economic challenges. He tells the story of the Obama election issue.

Within hours we knew we were selling out in critical parts of the city and around the country, and we went back on press, but we still had lines of people coming to this building, lines snaking down 40th Street wanting to buy a printed copy of the *New York Times*. It was a wonderful moment, and it reminds us that there is some real value to print. Print is not dead.

On a more global scale, three and a half years ago we had 650,000 people who had subscribed to the *New York Times* for two years or more. All of our research shows that if you are a subscriber to the *New York Times* for two years, we've pretty much got you for life. That number is now 822,000. It's going up, not down. So yes, newspapers are under enormous pressures. Street sales are way down. But if you think just about the growth from 650,000 to 820,000, papers are going to be around for a long time. Indeed one of our best sources of home-delivery subscription is the ads on the *New York Times* Web site's home page.

Radio was supposed to kill newspapers. Television was supposed to kill newspapers. The Internet was supposed to kill newspapers. And perhaps there will be a time where there is a kind of a reading device that gives you the freedom and flexibility that you have with the print in which case people will move to that and so will we.

The economic challenges for newspapers have nothing to do with the quality of the journalism, which translates without too much difficulty to other media; rather, it's a matter of the cost structures being so dramatically different, with advertisers continuously shifting their spending to online media. Arthur seeks solace from the other side of the equation, pointing out that the biggest costs associated with running a



The cover of the *New York Times* on the day after Obama's election
photo by author

newspaper are people, paper, production, and distribution, the last three of which are absent for Web delivery, so you don't have to make as much money to stay profitable. He realizes that the changes that are needed will be hard to implement, and it will be very difficult to make it through the transitional period.

The paper itself has been redesigned many times, as is easy to see when you compare an issue from 1912 or 1975 with today's. In the early seventies they moved from two sections to four sections, with a major redesign. Later the page size was narrowed, and more recently they integrated the Metro section into the A book, so it's international news first, then national news, followed by local news from New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. Arthur tells a story from farther back.

It was some time in the 1850s and a New York publisher, I think the owner of the *Tribune*, wrote in his own paper that he had just witnessed the death of newspapers. Literature, he said, would survive, but newspapers would inevitably fade away. He had just met the telegraph. Of course, it was the combination of that same telegraph, which gave you the immediacy of speed, and the horrible news from the Civil War, which was a

huge birth of newspapers in this country, because now people desperately wanted to know what was happening 2,000 miles away and could get that information the next day.

Newspapers have always been dealing with challenges. When radio started, it was perceived as a challenge. Television was supposed to kill newspapers. When we bought WQXR, which was the radio station of the *New York Times*, and a classical radio station, back in the 1930s or '40s, it was seen as a way of extending our reach by putting our news on the air so that people could hear it instead of reading it. That's basically been the thought all the way through. We have had a partnership with the Discovery Channel to see if we can translate our journalism into television, and most recently, of course, digital.

At the end of the day our job is to get the quality news and information that we provide to as many people as we possibly can. The Internet was the first technology that took us back to the written word. Radio took us away from it. Television took us away from it. But the Internet took us back. It was not much of a leap to realize that this was a critical element in fulfilling the mission of this enterprise, which is to create, collect, and distribute high-quality news and information.

There were always questions like, Are you going to be cannibalizing yourself? Will readers give up print? It was not a hard organizational challenge to say, "Yes, this is something we need to master!" There were many moments when we found ourselves facing critical choices. The first choice was, Do we want to create a site that is a New York site, the way that Boston.com, which is the *Boston Globe's* Web site, is for Boston, to be more of a community site? For the *New York Times* we felt that our community was no longer defined, if it ever had been, by the New York part of its title. It was a national newspaper with international aspirations through the *International Herald Tribune*, which we own, and we felt that the brand promise of the *Times* was sufficient to make it a destination in and of itself.

NYTIMES.COM

Martin Nisenholtz was hired from outside the newspaper industry. He brought deep digital experience to develop Nytimes.com and helped to shape the design concept. He chose to make the site reflect the *New York Times* in its design elements, including the banner, nameplates, and navigational structure, so that as you go through the site the subchannels are divided in the same sections as the printed paper. The judgment about news is also common to Web site and print, so the most critical stories of the day are on the homepage. Arthur supports the value of these design decisions.

We are saying to our users, "You have come to the *New York Times*. You are here because we believe you will get a great journalistic experience, perhaps the best possible. And now of course we're going to give it to you in a variety of ways that we could never have done in the printed pages." It's how we're interacting with our audiences that I think has been the biggest change.

The Web newsroom started in a separate location and with separate staff, but it was combined with the print newsroom when they moved into the beautiful new headquarters tower, where they could integrate the digital and print newsrooms and advertising. The goal was to make all of the journalists aware that they were filing content for the *New York Times* that would appear in a variety of different ways—on the Web, in the pages of the *International Herald Tribune* as well as the *New York Times*, in videos, audio, and slide shows. They were encouraged to embrace multiple media to reach as large an audience as possible, without controlling how the audience receives the journalism.

The economics of this multifaceted approach remains confused, as the financial models for new media are still in flux and the advertising revenue is migrating away from the traditional newspaper, challenging the viability of the current overhead structure. Initially the Web site was offered for free. There was a period where the op-ed page columnists Maureen Dowd and Frank Rich were put behind a paid wall, but they found that the wall inhibited growth, so they took it down. In the winter of 2010, the Web site moved back to a subscription model, showing that



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the right balance remains elusive. The New York Times has a lot of assets to keep it afloat, but it must be a painful process to adjust to the changing economic landscape.

JOURNALISM FIRST

Even as the financial challenges for the New York Times are visible to everyone, with a stock price of over \$50 in 2002 falling to a low of \$3.44 in 2009, Arthur remains optimistic about the future of the organization, and he has great faith in the Times culture and belief in its mission.

A number of years ago now, the American Society of Newspaper Editors did a survey to find out how the culture of the newsroom compares to other cultures out there. They came up with two that were similar, emergency rooms and the military, which was rather a shock to my colleagues in the newsroom. The thought is this: they are mission-driven, and the mission is a great one. The mission of emergency rooms is to save lives and the mission of the military, when appropriately used, is to protect society. The mission of journalists is to give people the information they need to keep democracy alive. That was why it was so easy for the newsroom to move from being a print-only organization to a Web and print organization, because they saw that it enhanced their ability to fulfill the mission.

I think it was in The Making of a President in 1960, Teddy White wrote that there was an assumption made from Boston to Washington that if you picked up a phone and called somebody in the other place that you'd both read that day's New York Times. It's a lovely thought and the heart of it is, you were connected by us. The Web allows you to be connected, but our challenge now is to connect our readers to each other in a much more cohesive and engaging way. A lot of the work we've done of late is designed to give our readers more opportunity to own the way they read the paper, and to own the choices that they make.

NYTimes.com Times Topics section screen capture

We've created a variety of tools to give people more ability to tell their friends what they have read in today's *New York Times* and say, "Look, these are the stories I think you should read." In addition, we want to give our readers the ability to get material from outside the *Times* but inside the *Times* Web experience. We have stake in a company called Blogrunner [a news aggregator that monitors articles and blog posts] that we use to select other sources of information, so if you have an interest in photography, we'll port to you those stories we think are of particular interest that appeared elsewhere.

This idea of personalization should be easy to deliver through the Internet. There are a lot of online versions, particularly with portals, but on-demand publishing could enable the concept in print as well. The *New York Times* has a research and development arm to look at future possibilities like this, aiming to stay a few steps ahead of competitors to maintain their reputation as the best newspaper in the United States. For example, when the iPhone was unveiled, the NYTimes application was one of the first apps available because they had been thinking about it in advance.

Nytimes.com is very well designed, with thoughtful layout and navigation, a video tab, and a series of subchannels under a Times Topics tab. Design director Khoi Vihn leads a full design team to innovate the user experience while retaining a consistent brand. He also writes a blog, Subtraction.com, that communicates his preference for controlled and minimalist design. The *New York Times* graphics department as a whole has a reputation for transforming data into visual media, both in print and online, creating diagrams, interactive maps, and videos. Their work won a National Design Award in Communication Design from the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum in 2009.

THE NEW YORK TIMES COMPANY REACHES an international audience through its ownership of the *International Herald Tribune*, for which Alice Rawsthorn writes a weekly column on design. In the next interview, Alice describes the dramatic changes in the newspaper industry that she has observed in the UK, both in terms of production and design.

ALICE RAWSTHORN

Interviewed September 22, 2008



← Alice Rawsthorn
photos by author

ALICE RAWSTHORN

Alice is the design critic of the *International Herald Tribune*. In her weekly “Design” column, published every Monday, Alice explores new directions in every area of design and their impact on our lives. Her column is syndicated to other newspapers and magazines worldwide. She also writes the “Object Lesson” column for the *New York Times Magazine*. Alice graduated in art and architectural history from Cambridge University in the UK and became a journalist. Her first job was at *Campaign*, a British magazine that covers media. In 1986 she joined the *Financial Times* and pioneered its coverage of the creative industries during a period of dramatic change for newspapers and journalism. From 2001 to 2006 Alice was director of the Design Museum in London. During her directorship, the number of visits to the museum rose by 40 percent, participation in the education program doubled, and the Design Museum Web site became the world’s most popular design site. She is also very involved with the arts, as a trustee of Arts Council England, the Whitechapel Gallery in London, and other arts organizations.

In the early nineties Alice became the Paris correspondent for the *Financial Times*. She had been based in London writing about the creative industries before that, so I wanted to keep in touch with her. I took advantage of a trip to Paris to track her down, and we met on the terrace outside the Café Marly at the Louvre. She remembers the occasion because I showed her some examples from the IDEO portfolio on my laptop, but she was much more interested in the laptop itself than the material that I showed her. We have kept in touch ever since, and it was a pleasure to interview her for this book in her London home. I recorded her in the conservatory, with a wall of ivy behind. She was wearing a spectacular jacket designed by Balenciaga.



← 1960s: Woman working at a mainframe computer
photo by Getty Images

PRINT AND WEB

Alice speaks about newspapers, journalism, and design with deep knowledge born of experience.

Personally, I really enjoy seeing that incredibly old-fashioned—although now beautifully finessed by Matthew Carter—*New York Times* masthead on the Web. I think they have managed to replicate something that stylistically looks very much like the offline paper, but to do so in a way that makes the site very easy to navigate. And the articles are very legible when you see them. The *New York Times* has really interrogated the Web and found ways of working well with it. But lots of other newspapers have stumbled along on the way and continue to stumble now.

I do think that the decision as to whether people read newspapers and magazines offline or online is currently broadly dictated by age, so I suspect that for anyone who's under the age of twenty-five now, they will not grow up to have the same obsessive relationship with printed newspapers and printed magazines as my generation has, but they may very well be reading exactly the same content on the Web sites of those newspapers and magazines.

I do know from my personal experience that preference really is formed by habit. For example, the printed newspaper that I read every day here in Britain is the *Guardian*. The online newspaper that I read everyday wherever I am anywhere in the world as well as the *International Herald Tribune* is the *New York Times*. In the olden days, before the Web site was launched, I would read the *New York Times* if I felt like treating myself, because it cost so much if you buy it here in London, or when I was in New York, where plowing through all those

endless sections seemed like the kind of “New Yorky” thing to do. But now when I go to New York, I actually find the printed *New York Times* really irritating. I’ve read the *New York Times* Web site every single day for about ten years now, so my relationship with that newspaper is a relationship with the Web site.

The positive review that Alice gives Nytimes.com is high praise, considering her strongly critical stance on most Web site design. New media fascinates her when the design rules are not yet established. For Web sites, there are already some simple conventions, like the search box belonging in the top right-hand corner, or the tabs for the table of contents being stretched horizontally along the top under a masthead, but most of the other rules have been inherited from print graphics.

I think readers feel very poorly equipped to judge whether Web sites are well designed or not. An apt parallel is the user-interface software on digital devices. It’s very hard for the 99 percent of us who don’t have PhDs in computer programming to judge whether user-interface software is well designed, because we don’t feel confident enough to comment positively on the various qualities it may or may not have, but we do know when it’s badly designed. If you’re using an overcomplicated cell phone or a ridiculously, neurotically complex MP3 player, you pick up on the bad points very, very quickly. And I think it’s exactly the same with Web site designs.

Everybody complains about the obvious problems—too much clutter that stops you [from] finding what you want, or the impossibility of printing anything that seems legible from a Web site. Web designers seem so engrossed by their screens that they may forget that a lot of the rest of us do still want to print things in the old-fashioned way, and so on and so forth. New media design really is an amazing Wild West at the moment, even though there are some fabulous Web sites around. I mean, just look at the success of Google Maps—such a simple concept, brilliantly executed and absolutely irresistible.

Confusion about values and design conventions often occurs with new technologies and big changes, and Alice has encountered dramatic

changes over her career. She remembers her first experience of new technology as a kid in the sixties, when her father took her with him on a business trip to Belgium.

He took me into what he called “The Computer Room,” which was literally full of big metal cupboards, probably the size of my house, but with even less power than an iPod nano. And I had a very vivid memory of clanging going on within the cupboards. It was huge—absolutely massive—and probably not particularly powerful, but it seemed very mysterious, enigmatic, and alluring. My father, who’s an engineer and obsessed by mechanics and technology, told me that computers were the future, so I formed a very positive view of technology at an early age.

In 1980, when she graduated from university, she went into journalism by getting a place on a graduate training scheme, a form of apprenticeship that included all of the most mundane tasks in the office. One of them was standing over a prototype fax machine, which was called an Infotec. It took forty-five minutes to transmit a single sheet of paper from the magazine’s office in central London to the printers, who were about sixty miles away, but that was quicker than the time it took a motorcycle messenger to get there, so the technology was welcomed as a leap forward into the future.

THE FINANCIAL TIMES

Alice joined the *Financial Times* in 1986, just when Rupert Murdoch was taking on the print unions. He set up a computerized printing operation in the East End of London for the *Times*, the *Sunday Times*, the *Sun*, and the *News of the World*, sparking a technological revolution that would transform the finances of newspapers. The unions had been led to assume that Murdoch intended to launch a London evening newspaper from the new presses, but he secretly planned to relocate all of his papers there. A bitter dispute started upon the dismissal of 6,000 employees who had gone on strike. Many suspected that the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher had colluded in the affair as a way of weakening the British trade union movement.

This revolution in productivity led to the transformation of the *Financial Times* from a national newspaper dealing with the City of London and British financial affairs to an international financial paper. It was a time when technology transformed not only the way that newspapers were printed and produced but also the way journalists worked.

When I first joined the *Financial Times* in 1986, I worked as a journalist in the traditional way. You had a great big cast-iron typewriter on which you typed out your stories. You then picked up the pieces of paper, generally with Tipp-Ex dribbling down your arm through all the corrections you've made, and walked to the news desk, which was a fairly terrifying experience because we were all very, very frightened by the indomitable news editor, David Walker. You then distributed various carbon copies in the correct tray, still with the Tipp-Ex curdling on your arm.

Alternatively, if you were on location on a tight deadline, you had to phone your copy in to the paper. Say there was an important court case and you needed to report on the verdict. You had to physically go to the court, listen to the verdict, run out, try and beat all your competitors from rival newspapers into the nearest public telephone box, and dictate your report through to the copy editor. You had adrenaline surging. You felt like this proper old-school film noir reporter when you were doing it, but it wasn't an efficient way of working as a journalist.

The paper was printed on a separate floor of the same building as the newsroom. Newspaper headquarters in those days were vertically integrated industrial operations. The printers even had their own pub inside the building where they seemed to spend most of their time, so they were certainly rarely at the printing presses. What was then called Fleet Street, the nickname of the national newspaper industry in Britain, was really an old-fashioned, industrial oligopoly. There was an unspoken, rather corrupt and nepotistic agreement between the newspaper proprietors and the newspaper unions, both of whom were equally corrupt and both of whom were in cahoots to drive up the cost of producing national newspapers, which of course prevented anyone from coming in and setting up competitors.

It was a very entrenched establishment industry with very invidious, very traditional, hopelessly antiquated working practices and completely implacable unions, who were absolutely resistant to change. They saw progress as a real threat to their way of life and their very high wages.

Computerized printing slashed the cost of newspaper production, while the quality of the visual presentation was much better, so people had to start thinking much more seriously about newspaper design. The size of the newspaper, the typeface that was used, and the quality of photography became more and more important in making a really attractive and appealing product. The print quality of the old-fashioned analog printing presses had been so poor that any subtlety or sophistication of design was lost.

The reproduction of photographs was dreadful. I remember writing a feature for the *Financial Times* and the only portrait that we could find of the subject was one in which he'd actually been photographed with his eyes closed. I showed this disconsolately to the features editor and said, "I suppose we can't use this, what are we going to do?" And he said, "It really doesn't matter; once it's been printed it will be so fuzzy, no one will notice the closed eyes." And this was in fact the case. So, the visual side of newspapers was completely ignored.

Design was not taken seriously in national newspapers in Britain until David Hillman of Pentagram redesigned the *Guardian* in the 1988, introducing British readers to the innovations of mixed-font titles and a two-section daily paper, beautifully designed on a grid-based system. The newspaper industry had never been imaginative or creative from a visual perspective, but the combination of the new print quality and Hillman's design precedent changed the standards forever.

Purely practical issues like cost have dominated many of the decisions made by newspaper proprietors. For example, the move toward smaller formats was driven by the need to reduce the costs of paper and ink rather than by the desire to make the papers easier to handle and read. In the early 2000s, when both the *Times* and the *Independent* decided to adopt a compact format, all they did was shrink the layout of the old-fashioned broadsheet to fit. The *Guardian* was the first national



← The Guardian
photo by Nicolas Zurcher

newspaper to think about how many columns were needed and how wide each column should be to allow reading in a way that was easy on the eyes and facilitated comprehension.

CONTENT LIBERATED BY NEW TECHNOLOGIES

Another innovation in the *Guardian* was to leverage the amazing print quality that was available by the early 2000s by printing a photograph on a full two-page spread in the middle of the paper called “The picture of the day.” A dramatic image was always chosen, and the quality was highlighted through a clever use of micro and macro scales. This communicated a message that the image would not have worked on the limited-resolution media of television or Internet.

It was in the 1990s that technology really started changing the way journalists worked. I remember being equipped with an early mobile phone at the *Financial Times*. You were given this bricklike instrument, which would weigh your hand down horribly when you held it, with only enough battery power to last for 45 minutes, but this was seen as a huge revolution in journalism technology. And of course as soon as mobiles or cell phones became lighter and more efficient with longer lasting batteries, it transformed journalism completely.

For me, technology has been completely liberating. With a Blackberry, a cell phone, and a laptop, the idea that I can work anywhere in the world and, thanks to the Internet, have access to an incredible research archive wherever I am in the world, is quite astonishing. That has made journalism much more accessible to a wider range of people, particularly now that with blogs they don’t even need to use established media outlets to communicate and disseminate their work.

Those technologies have also had a dramatic impact on the form, virtual and otherwise, that media takes. The nineties was a fascinating period to be a journalist because it was a period of considerable turbulence. A lot of journalists and editors do

tend to be quite geeky, and certainly technophiles, so there's an enormous amount of excitement as our computers become more and more sophisticated.

The more intelligent publishers of newspapers realized early that the Internet would soon become an important new medium, so they invested in it heavily, but sometimes without the support of the editors and reporters. The *Financial Times* hired a separate team to run the Web site, but without giving the online staff the same training and resources as those who worked on the paper. There was also a lot of uncertainty about how to use the Internet as a source of revenue. The first approach was to replicate the traditional financial structure, hoping that people would pay to use the Web site, as they did for the *Wall Street Journal* for many years. If the quality of output had matched the standards of the paper, perhaps the *Financial Times* might also have succeeded with a subscription model, as the audience and qualities of the two papers are similar. The *Financial Times* offered its Web site for free at first and then started charging a subscription—an obvious mistake as people resent having to pay for something they've had for free at first. Web site usage dropped dramatically.

Newspapers are still struggling to come to terms with how they present themselves on the Web. Do they do a pastiche, a pixilated online pastiche of the offline printed paper; or do they produce something dramatically different? The *New York Times* has been successful because it refined its newsprint design rather sensitively and intelligently so it looks appealing and legible on the Web, but there are many more newspapers that have found it very difficult.

The great thing about the Internet is that it has made the media and the dissemination of information accessible very cheaply and relatively easily for absolutely everyone. For us as readers it's been incredibly liberating because it has blown open the media and the process of communication. If you want to express a point of view, you can launch a blog and you can find the six or seven million other people in the world who want to engage with you on that subject. It's been a fantastically liberating medium from a cultural and communication point of view.

This has had a dramatic effect on the old-school media industry. The sensible newspapers and magazines realize that the Internet was yet another form of distribution for them, one that probably will eventually squeeze out old-fashioned printing on paper. Hence, the really imaginative, sophisticated titles will embrace this with relish and have very vigorous, interesting, stimulating Web sites. And of course all sorts of other institutions have done this as well.

The more sophisticated newspapers don't see the printed newspaper and the online version as being entirely separate. They really do integrate the two. Increasingly you'll see those little sentences at the bottom of the printed article telling you to go to the Web site for more information. It can satisfy the crusty old columnists who want to write 3,000 words about something they think is very important, but actually there's only space for 800 in the newspaper, so they can inveigh at the length they wish on the Web site.

The Internet has transformed the relationship between the reader, the writer, and the editorial hierarchy of the media. In the olden days, the only way that readers would interact with writers and editors was by writing a letter to the editor or a letter to an individual journalist. It was time consuming and laborious to draft and write the letter, find a stamp, and post it.

Now everything you write as a columnist is immediately blogged. Whether it's simply a link to the column from blogs or other Web sites, it becomes instantly accessible all over the world on thousands of other Web sites, literally on the day it's published on the site. You get immediate response. Sometimes people Google you, or they go through Facebook, or MySpace, or your own Web site. They will email you, picking up on arcane points you may or may not have made in the column. Other times they either sing your praises or point out in horrifying detail the flaws in your argument on their own blogs or Web sites. So you're very aware there'll be an immediate debate about everything you write. And if there wasn't, you should probably start worrying, because it means that it's so bland and boring that really nobody's bothered to respond to it.

It's made the process much more democratic, much more interactive, and I think more fun. And for somebody like me, writing for a wonderful but rather expensive newspaper like the *International Herald Tribune*, it's lovely to think that students all over the world on design courses can log on to it every Monday for no money whatsoever and engage in a very vigorous discussion. The *International Herald Tribune* sells around 250,000 copies a day around the world, but the Web site has a readership of nearly five million people, which is fantastic.

WITH IRA GLASS, WE MOVE from print to radio. Ira explains how he has perfected the art of narrative, hooking the listeners with an idea and keeping them engaged by the flow of events.

IRA GLASS

Interviewed December 8, 2008



IRA GLASS

Ira started work as an intern at National Public Radio more than thirty years ago. He was a reporter and host on several NPR programs, including *Morning Edition*, *All Things Considered*, and *Talk of the Nation*. Since 1995, he has hosted and produced *This American Life*, from WBEZ. The show was nationally syndicated in June 1996 and is distributed by Public Radio International. It reaches over 1.7 million listeners on more than 500 stations weekly, with an average listening time of 48 minutes. Ira's work is original and influential in radio. For a long time *This American Life* was exclusively a radio show, but in 2007 Ira and his team started experimenting with a television version, developed separately to suit the medium. He continues to produce the weekly radio show, which is also available as a free podcast. The television show aired on the Showtime network for two seasons.

← Ira Glass
photos by author

Ira moved his base of operations from Chicago to New York in 2006, so I was able to interview him in the IDEO office in New York. I was lucky to reach him, as he is firmly focused on producing *This American Life* and faces weekly deadlines. I made contact through Larry Keeley, a friend and president of Chicago-based Innovation and Design firm Doblin Group Inc., who sits on the board of WBEZ. I could tell that Ira was a professional interviewer: when I offered him the radio microphone, he nimbly installed it in just the right position on his shirt so that it would be out of sight to the cameras. When we had finished recording, he spent another hour talking to the people in our office, asking probing questions, obviously interested in what we do.



← Mixing
photo by George Barcos

INTIMACY

The structure of most radio news stories is like that of a legal argument, similar to the format of an eighth-grade paper, with a topic sentence starting each paragraph, followed by a collection of facts and a quote or two, before moving on to the next topic sentence, facts, quotes, and so forth. Ira wanted something different.

From cutting tape and listening to other people's work, I came to feel that I didn't want to structure a story like an argument. I wanted to structure it with narrative motion. Something would happen that would lead to another, and so on, so you have the forward momentum of things happening. Every now and then you'd leave the action to say something about it, to have some thought about it. So the structure is an anecdote, then a moment of reflection and then another anecdote.

When I give seminars to reporters, I play a story about a guy who worked in an office and somebody's twelve-year-old kid came to the office every now and then. She was a good kid, so he would joke around with her. One day he goes into the bathroom, and when he comes out of the bathroom with his glasses in his pocket, he sees her down the hall, so he starts clowning around, putting his hands like claws, and wandering down the hall towards the girl saying, "I didn't expect to see you here."

Then I stop and say to the reporters, "At that point, nobody turns off the radio, but if you think about it, it's an incredibly banal story; it's just a story about somebody coming out of a bathroom in their office. There's nothing to it as narrative. It has none of the stage props of a great story, but you'd be hard pressed to turn it off because you can feel that it has motion."

You can tell this is a story with a destination. You can tell that the glasses in the pocket are the X-factor, so that when he gets down to the end of the hall it's not going to work out well for him. You can just feel through the motion of this that it's a train in a station heading out towards a destination."

Once I understood that, whenever I had tape of my interviews, I divided the material off in my head into the action part of the story and the thought part of the story. When I talk about stories with the rest of the staff, we say, "Is this working? What do you think of this part? There's too much action! You need another thought here. Now this has too many thoughts in a row. Get rid of this and this."

Ira has honed the art of narrative. In each of the segments in *This American Life* he hooks his audience into the dream of an idea at the beginning and then starts the action, with one thing happening, then another and another, and you're stuck. You're listening and you don't know why exactly. You can tell it's going to go somewhere, but by the time he reveals the direction, you're five or six minutes in, and you're emotionally involved, often rubbing your eyes to hold back tears. You have connected with the characters in the story and you have to find out what will happen to them. Radio allows you to be much more intimately connected to the story than you could be on television or in print.

Radio has a number of advantages over print and TV. One of them is that the intimacy is the default position. That's intimacy in both a quiet, emotional way and also somebody being funny. There are certain moments in the show where, because it's playing out in real time on tape, it just carries a feeling to it. If you were trying to do it in print, you would have to be an incredibly skilled A+ level writer to pull it off with as much feeling as my intern can do with a digital tape recorder and a nice mic. You get so much so easily!

LEARNING RADIO

The fluency that allows Ira to make intimate radio so easily has been perfected during a long career. He started at NPR when he was nineteen, and his first assignment was to be production assistant to Joe Frank, who made a dreamy hour-long show where he would tell wandering stories. You couldn't be sure why you were listening, but you couldn't turn it off. Ira was very attracted to the material, wanting to learn how it came to have that irresistible quality.

He also worked as an assistant to Keith Talbot and claims that he garnered more than half of everything he knows about making radio from the experience. Keith's ideas about how to make documentaries were way ahead of his time. He experimented with the structure, unrestrained by the conventional approach. Documentary is generally built around the narrator, but Keith would sometimes have characters from within the documentary narrate.

One of my favorite shows he ever did was a show called *Ocean Hour*, where the narration took you from place to place; it was a series of stories about people living in the ocean and on the ocean. For example, one segment of the story was about a person who lived on the beach, completely separate from the economy of the world, getting everything he needed to live from things that washed up, plus hunting and fishing.

What took you from place to place were two guys sitting on a pier. One guy is telling the other guy about this imaginary character that he'd made up when he was a little kid, and the imaginary character loved the ocean. He was talking very softly, and you could hear the sound of the pier and the music that was composed for this purpose, with incredible audio soundscape. It was really beautiful! Between each of the segments, instead of having the news announcer say, "And next we're going to go to ... wherever," this guy would tell the other guy a little story that he'd made up when he was a little kid, and the other character would react. It was very pleasant, like listening to two buddies talking, and it moved you gently into the next segment. It was just very lovely!

Keith taught me the technique of having people give an interview in which they narrate an entire story themselves and you would edit the interviewer out. They would provide all the anecdotes. You would never have to hear a question, so it would sound like a person just talking. And then I learned from him how to use music—the power of using music and where to bring it in and bring it out, and using music the way you’d use a score in a movie.

After this apprenticeship, Ira moved to daily news shows, becoming a news producer and reporter for *All Things Considered* and *Morning Edition*. He brought his skills with him, trying to do stories with characters, scenes, funny bits, and emotional bits, even if it was just the breaking news. He had learned from Keith, and he was listening to other people’s work, and eventually he realized that he had evolved a template of his own with a unique approach to radio production. Another contributing influence came from the musicals that he had seen as a child.

When I was a kid the predominant cultural object of my childhood wasn’t rock music. I was born in 1959 and grew up in the suburbs of Baltimore, so it was the sixties when I was growing up. I really should have been into rock music, but I wasn’t a baby boomer, so I didn’t have that. Instead, because we were Jews growing up on the East Coast of the United States, the music in my house, the records that my parents had were all Broadway musicals. When a musical would come to Baltimore my mom would take us, and some of my earliest memories were going to these shows, and they made a really strong impression. We’d play the records over and over. I still know all the words to *Man of La Mancha*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, and *Camelot*.

There’s an aesthetic to those shows that includes funny parts, but they’re about something grand, and they go toward some sort of emotional thing. They are both funny and sad, and they’re willfully trying to entertain you. They’re not hard to get; they want you to get them. There came a point in my work where I realized that there is a kind of template for the work



Ira Glass
photo by Stuart Mullenberg

that I do, and that even while I was doing news stories, I was trying to make them have the feeling of those old musicals, which is almost the least cool thing you could possibly say about anything you would ever do!

Ira had been working in public radio for sixteen years when he started *This American Life*, so he was one of their most experienced producers and reporters. He understood how powerful radio is for news reporting, political commentary, and music, but felt that it was not being used for telling stories. Where was the feeling you used to get from radio dramas? Where was the storytelling that had made radio a successful new medium in the twenties and thirties? He wanted to make a radio show that would have this kind of feeling. He set about designing it from the creative impetus of the template that he had evolved in his head for anecdotes and reflective commentary. He asked himself, “What does it sound like? What should the narration be like? What kinds of stories are best? What will be engaging to me?” He wanted to make something that he would be thrilled by, with something really traditional about it, where the stories would shape the whole design.

The normal pattern in broadcast journalism is that every story you start on ends up on the air, because it’s expensive. Ira decided to be much more selective, starting work on fifteen or twenty stories to end up with three or four. His team works very much as a group, with many

different people contributing to each piece. Finding the stories is about half of what they do, as they start with a long list of ideas, working toward a theme that has the right balance between an abstract concept and the finding of real people to make the story come to life. They don't normally choose a story unless they have a sense that it may lead to some new thought, but in the best stories, the plan inevitably changes once things get going.

I thought I invented this structure of storytelling, learning from all the people whose work I liked. I felt like I was sitting in an editing room at NPR in Washington and invented this structure of some action, and then a moment of reflection, and some action, and so on.

And then I went home to Baltimore, where I'm from, for the Jewish High Holidays. I went to the services where there was the same rabbi as when I was a kid. That rabbi was a total entertainment package. That guy could really give a sermon! He was funny, and then he'd do a little story from the Bible. Next were scenes from movies he'd just seen, then he'd be reading from the scriptures. At the end he said, "Here's what we're going to do with these thoughts this week. Here's what we're going to carry with us when we walk out that door!" He was just an incredible performer. We were in Baltimore, but he was from New York, with a thick New York accent. We always felt like he sounded like a real Jew to us, because of the New York accent.

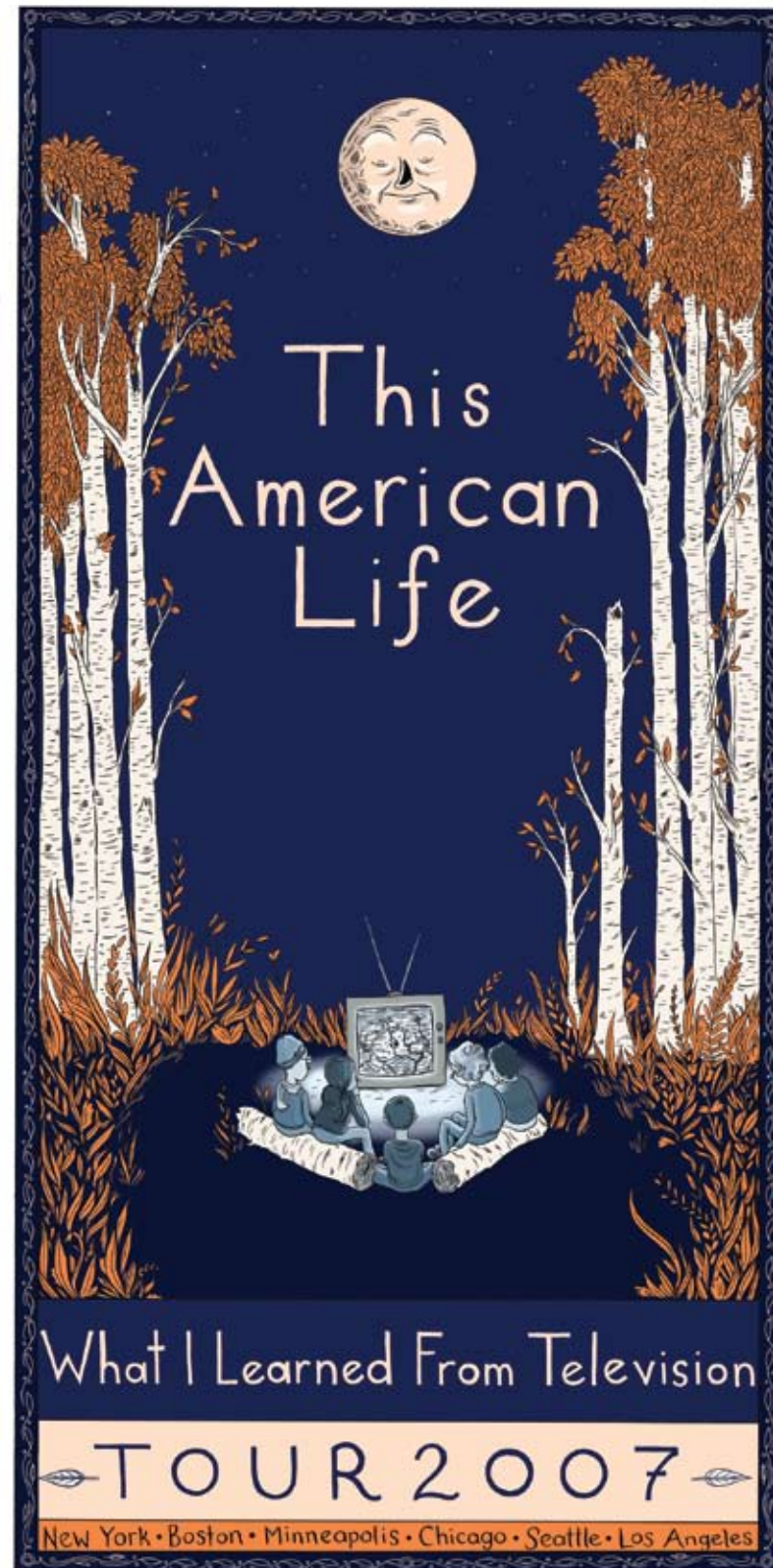
My radio show had been on the air for four or five years at that point, so as I listened to his sermon, I was taking apart the structure in my head, and I realized that it had the same structure as my radio show! Since then I've talked to people who have been to seminary, and they assure me that every sermon has the structure of the radio show. It turns out that I reinvented the oldest structure of storytelling, but I do try to use it in a way that maximizes what you can do on the radio.

TELEVISION

In 2007 Ira and his team launched a television version of *This American Life*, distributed on the Showtime network. Initially the network suggested a season of twelve shows, but Ira begged them to limit it to six because they were doing the radio show at the same time. They soon discovered big differences between what worked on radio and what would be needed for television. On the radio they could reconstruct stories from the past by finding the people who could recount events. Some of the best radio is made by finding people who have had something interesting happen to them and are also good talkers. If you interview them and they tell their stories well, that's about as good as gets. Interviews about the past on television are usually not very interesting because they fail to harness the full power of the medium. You want to see the action that is being described, so you either have to reenact the story that is being told or capture the action as it happens.

The longer we did it, the looser we got, but also the more we understood what works on TV. At the beginning we really tried to do a lot of stories where the action happened in the past. We tried to find things we could film to cover those plot points that happened in the past, or we'd do cartoons, or find some way to have visuals on screen while somebody is telling the story that happened in the past. We came to understand the real laws of television broadcasting, that it's better if the camera is there when it's happening, whereas for radio, it doesn't matter. It's often better to let the people who were there tell you about it, because they'll bring more feeling to it that way.

You can have intimacy in TV, but the apparatus that gets you there is completely different and a lot more difficult to make happen. You have to build a whole scaffolding to support the moment of intimacy. It works best if you have a lot of motion before, so the quiet can seem more quiet. On film there's something about seeing somebody's face that carries so much feeling to it. That's definitely an advantage of film and television, but you also get something from not seeing their face, from being able to imagine it.



← *What I Learned from Television* poster
courtesy of *This American Life* from
Chicago Public Radio

There are characters who have been on the radio show where I think we're better off that people didn't see them. I feel like it's easier to imagine being the person, easier to relate if you don't see them. In terms of controlling the storytelling, since the audience can't see them, I am in control of every bit of information that comes at you and the speed at which it comes at you. If you see them you're getting information that I can't control about how they look, and how they dress, and where they're sitting.

By the time they had finished their second television season, they were having a hard time finding stories that had the right kind of narrative arc, since they were looking for plots with characters experiencing change for really interesting reasons as well as an overarching idea that offered a commentary of some kind with universal values. That is hard to find for television, where you want to record the story in real time. It's much easier to edit a story that makes a complete narrative by assembling elements, as you can in radio.

Ira's friend Robert Krulwich went from public radio to television successfully, achieving acclaimed innovation in both media. He said that you get to a point in radio where the levers of it are so simple you can learn them all, and if you've learned your craft you can always make something work. He said that in TV there are so many factors in play that it is never predictably controllable. Even if you've set the whole thing up perfectly, the person will glance toward the camera or away from the camera at the key moment and will destroy your quote, or something will happen in the background in a subtle way, or you have not framed it right. There are so many subtle variables that can interfere with the moment that you're trying to create.

A documentarian like Michael Moore invents scenes to create an entertaining way to stage his narrative as film, for example trying to get the head of General Motors to talk to him. That's a good theatrical conceit, used to carry everything else he's trying to do. Morgan Spurlock used a similar approach for *Super Size Me*, setting it up so that he could be filmed in real time going through the process of eating only at McDonald's for thirty days. This kind of overt construct turns the output into a polemic, while *This American Life* is a report of life as it is observed, carefully chosen to deliver a higher level insight at the same time. That is much more difficult to deliver in television than it is in radio.

I don't feel like I have a personal relationship with John Stewart [of the *Daily Show*], though I adore John Stewart and I watch him all the time, but I feel like he's talking to millions. Whereas with Howard Stern, I know he's talking to millions, but it's much more direct, it's much more personal, and I have a closer relationship. My feelings about Howard Stern and everybody on his show, Artie Lange and Robin [Quivers], are so much stronger. And it's the same thing with Terry Gross, and Garrison Keillor, and the other people on the radio that I like. It's much more one-to-one.

Some 600,000 people listen to the podcast of *This American Life*, a larger number than anything else from public radio, but Ira feels that he didn't need to do anything to make that happen. There was no need to design the output in a different way for the podcast version, because radio is particularly suited to the Internet when it's done with the kind of intimacy that Ira creates.

The Web is more like radio than it is like most things, because you're sitting there alone and somehow it's close to you. I think the reason it works over the Internet is because there's something in the intimacy of it that's like the intimacy of Facebook. As a character on the radio I don't seem further away than your friend on Facebook. I don't seem like an official sort of announcer. I just seem like somebody who happened to get a radio show.

The laws of narrative are the laws of narrative, and what engages us is simply what engages us. I feel like those things still apply in the new digital world. We don't democratize our show at all. We don't even let you comment on our Web site. You take the product that we give you!

IN THE NEXT INTERVIEW, COLIN CALLENDER explains how he safeguards the integrity of content in his role as a film and television producer. He believes that great producers create protected working environments in which talented people can do their most brilliant work, and that his job is to deliver onscreen the vision that has been articulated and agreed on by the people responsible for the content.

COLIN CALLENDER

Interviewed February 26, 2009



← Colin Callender
photos by author

COLIN CALLENDER

As a founding member of HBO's Programming Group and the president of HBO Films, Colin played a central role in turning HBO into a pioneering programming powerhouse. He has helped transform the entertainment landscape, setting new benchmarks for quality film and television production. Under his auspices, such acclaimed projects as *If These Walls Could Talk* (1996), *61** (2001), *Elephant* (*Palme d'Or*) (2003), *Angels in America* (2003), *Maria Full of Grace* (2004), *John Adams* (2008), and *Recount* (2008) reached the screen. In October 2008 he announced his intention to leave HBO to set up his own company. Born and raised in England, Colin began his career as a stage manager with London's Royal Court Theatre before joining Granada Television as a trainee. In 1983 he formed The Callender Company and reached an international audience as producer of the nine-hour, Emmy-winning *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*. In 1987 he ventured into feature films, serving as producer of Peter Greenaway's *The Belly of an Architect*. That same year he joined Home Box Office as executive producer of HBO Showcase, which produced innovative films that brought together a mix of exciting new and established talent.

I saw Colin speak at a panel about the future of media and was impressed by the clarity of his vision, so I asked him for an interview. He lives and works in an enormous Beverly Hills house perched on the edge of a cliff above a green ravine, with a view of the Los Angeles basin in the distance. When I arrived for the interview there was a landscaping crew, with six gardeners and two pickup trucks, hard at work. Colin showed me into his office and I set up to record him sitting in a comfortable old leather chair in front of a poster of *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*. At one point in our conversation we were interrupted by his young daughter, and his face lit up with delight when he she came through the door.



← Theater
photo by Scott Liddell

THE LIFE AND ADVENTURES OF NICHOLAS NICKLEBY

Colin fell in love with the theater as a student, and he wanted to be part of everything that went on behind the scenes, leading him to a career as a television and film producer. He started working as a stagehand in the early seventies but soon had the opportunity to join Granada Television as a trainee, in which role he was introduced to all aspects of TV and film production. Film production in the UK had all but vanished, and Colin detected that an independent production sector was about to emerge in British television. He moved to Hollywood, because it was the home of independent production and he wanted to understand how it worked. He spent a year learning the ropes and then returned to London to set up his own company in 1977.

After I left university I went to see a man called Jeremy Isaacs, who at the time ran the documentary division of one of the television networks. He sat there and he said, “Why are you here?” And I said, “Well, I’m very interested in working in television.” And he said, “You just left university. What do you know about anything? I mean, if you’re going to make documentaries about the world and about issues, you’ve got to have lived. Come back to me when you’ve lived a bit!” Some years later, I did go back to him.

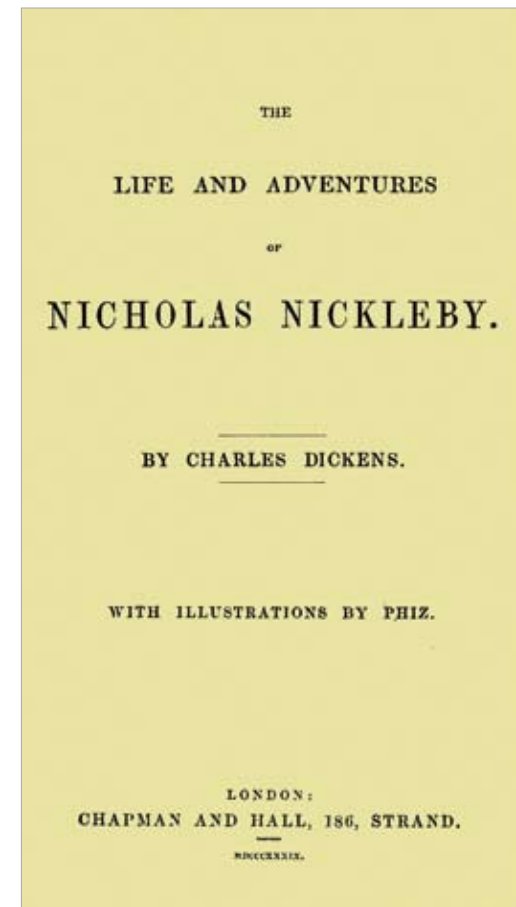
By the time he returned, Colin had had started his own company and acquired the rights from the Royal Shakespeare Company to do *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*. Jeremy Isaacs had just been appointed the chief executive of Channel 4, a new broadcast network in Britain that would be dedicated to commissioning independent productions to attract new audience segments. Colin arranged a meeting with Isaacs and said, “Look, you probably won’t remember, but you

told me ten years ago to come back to you, and I'm coming back to you now." The result of the conversation was an agreement to embark on the production of *Nicholas Nickleby*, an experience that proved to be formative for Colin.

As well as the rights to *Nicholas Nickleby*, Colin put the financing together from three sources, Channel 4 in Britain, Mobile Oil in the United States, and an international distributor from Germany, but he realized that each financier had different requirements for the production. Channel 4 wanted to play the eight-and-a-half-hour production as it had been on the stage, in two chunks of over four hours; Mobile Oil wanted four two-hour films, and the German distributor wanted nine episodes, each under an hour.

I remember thinking, "I don't think I can make this work." I called a meeting at Brown's Hotel in London and assembled the stage directors of the Royal Shakespeare Company, the director for the television adaptation, the three financiers, and the writer. I sat everyone around a table and said, "Look, it's 9:00 on a Tuesday. We've booked this room till 6:00, and we've got to come out of this room all in agreement on the right way to make this project. There's only one way to do it. We can't do three different versions. It just simply is not going to work. There is no way we can be a horse, a camel, and a donkey all at the same time. If we can come to an agreement at the end of the day on what it is we're making, then I feel confident we can go out and do it, but if we can't come to an agreement, then we should all go our separate ways."

In fairness to all the partners, we had a very interesting conversation, with everyone making their case for their needs. Trevor Nunn, who was the artistic director of the Royal Shakespeare Company, made an impassioned plea for what he thought it should be. At the end of the day I said, "I have to tell you that I initially told Trevor Nunn that I could see how to adapt his concept to the screen. He and I agreed on what it should be. You've now heard what Trevor thinks it should be, and that's why I as the producer signed on. My job as the producer is to deliver on the screen the vision that he articulated and that we agreed on, and to protect that along



← Original title page of *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby* courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

the journey that this project goes through. This is the only way we can do it!" And everybody signed on.

From then on, that focus and clarity informed every single decision, whether it was a financial decision, a logistics decision, or a question of who to hire. I think that the producer's role is to protect the vision of the project at every step of the way.

The production brought together people from the theater, film, and television, with the disciplines intermingled. Theater people did the theater production, the director for the television adaptation was a television director, and the

cinematographer was a film cinematographer. It was shot with a single camera recording on video, with the sound recorded separately by a film sound recordist. The Old Vic Theatre was turned into a sound stage, using both the proscenium arch and the audience over a ten-week period. The mingling and mixing of the disciplines, with diverse talents and different creative points of view, enabled an original approach.

No one had ever done this before. In the past, theater had been brought to the camera by shooting it as if it were a football match: there were a bunch of cameras, the thing would play live, you'd shoot it a couple of times, you'd shoot some reverses of the audience, and that would be it. Alternatively, you'd put it on a sound stage, or you'd shoot it like a straight film. But *Nicholas Nickleby* had a unique theatrical component to it, so that was very important.

We had Ingmar Bergman's *[The] Magic Flute* in mind for inspiration, as we thought about how to do it for the screen. We had

to keep that theatricality. On the stage *Nicholas Nickleby* had almost no set. I think they'd gone off to scrap yards and picked up pieces of wood, but early on people said, "This is going to be on film, on television, so we've got to build realistic sets." Trevor Nunn said something to me back then which I remember to this day. He said, "No, no, no. Let the audience fill in the blanks, exactly like radio." And what he was saying was, "Allow the audience to participate in the process."

I learned two things out of *Nickleby*: The idea of letting the audience participate in the process, in the journey—to take them on a journey with you where they actually have to work a bit to be there. The second thing I learned was that the process of making something, the way in which the people are brought together and the way they work together, impacts the result on the screen. Those were two crucial lessons.

DIRECTORS, PRODUCERS, AND EXECUTIVES

The term *producer* is used in lots of different ways, causing confusion. Colin was a producer for years before he became an executive, and having sat on both sides of the table, he feels that the producer has a crucial role during the whole creative process. As an executive at HBO looking at movies that he might want to commission, his first question was, Who's the producer? His second question was, Whom do we call when the movie isn't quite working?

There is a saying in the industry that film is the director's medium, that theater is the writer's medium, and television is the producer's medium. Colin thinks that there is some truth to that, but that every project has a different history and a different way of unfolding. Sometimes the original concept is the director's, sometimes a writer's, and sometimes a producer's. Creative partnerships are crucial to success, and it's not an accident that some of the greatest directors in the world have had long-term relationships with the producers as well as with film editors and composers.

A few years ago we did a wonderful film called *The First Hundred Years of Films*. It was a set of compilations and interviews with directors, and there was a sequence in which there were interviews with Robert Altman and Fred Zinnemann about their movie-making styles. Fred Zinnemann talked with great passion about knowing exactly what he wanted to do when he walked onto a set: every shot was planned and choreographed, including the framing, composition, lighting, and wardrobe. Robert Altman, by contrast, would talk about how he didn't know what he was going to shoot or where he was going to put the camera. He left everything to chance, and that's how he made his movies. Every filmmaker is different!

Part of the challenge for the producer is to understand what that director's process is, and to build a working environment that allows them to do their very best work. I'll give you a fine example of that. One of the last pieces I did at HBO was a big production based on David McCullough's book *John Adams*, and it was a recreation of the story of the Founding Fathers told through the second president, John Adams. Tom Hooper was the immensely talented director from Britain. Because it was a period drama, it involved a lot of CGI and special effects.

Well, Tom is a brilliant director, but not unlike Robert Altman, he wings it on the day. The production team were having terrible trouble wrangling him, and they came to me and said, "Colin, you've got to tell him to have a shot list; he's got to shoot in a certain sort of way; it's the only way we can get this done." I was looking at the dailies of the film, some of which were startlingly brilliant, with composition and camera angles that were beyond eccentric and yet vibrantly emotional.

This went on for a while and finally I said to my production guys at HBO, "If we do that, we'll kill this guy. We'll kill the very thing that's making this really special. Your job is not to try and fit him into your predetermined process. Your job is to understand what his process is and work around him. You can't fix this by putting him into a straightjacket, as that would destroy the intuitive creativity that's happening moment by moment on the set." And to their credit, that's what they did!

There's a shot at the end, in the last hour of *John Adams* in which Paul Giamatti as John Adams is walking through a field of corn reflecting on his life, and for a moment there's a shot of him upside down. Now to this day I don't know what led Tom Hooper to put that inverted shot in the sequence. By any logical standards it made no sense whatsoever. I'm not even sure if he did it intentionally, but I saw it there and it took my breath away. It's an extraordinary moment, immensely powerful.

Colin believes that great producers create protected working environments in which talented people can do their most brilliant work, but behind the scenes they are also responsible for the finances, finding sponsors, raising money, and developing terms for distribution. When he came back to Britain to start his own company, Colin worked with distributor Richard Price, who represented television companies in the UK and handled the sale of their programming around the world. The VHS cassette had just arrived and that facilitated sales of British programming internationally, since foreign buyers were able to look at material more easily than before. So Colin began to raise money internationally in advance for British productions, finding outside financing and bringing it to the British broadcasters for collaborative projects.

If an idea is strong enough, Colin has always been able to find a way to finance a project. By a strong idea, he means one that is both powerful and simple yet distinctive and different. That was core to his thinking as a producer as he began to evolve Home Box Office into a compelling brand. Once the idea has those attributes, the two most important components in making it work are getting the script right and skillful editing. You can have the finest director in the world, but if you've got a terrible script there's nothing you can do. Editing is a combination of a technical craft and sheer inspiration.

It's that intersection that's so exciting. It's a left brain/right brain intersection, not just for editors, but also for everyone involved. I do think it is literally a combination, because making a big movie or television series is a very complicated process. It's not like painting, which needs an artist, canvas, brushes, and paint. A film or a television production is an enormously collaborative process involving a whole horde of people. Part of it is inspiration, intuition, and the creativity



An engaged audience
photo by Pavel Losevsky

of the moment, and part of it is stepping back from that and keeping a sense of what the whole is, and understanding the sort of internal DNA that makes something work and working with that DNA, playing with that DNA.

ENGAGING WITH CONTENT

As the Internet has grown, along with accessible and inexpensive tools for creating content, the idea that audiences want to interact with their entertainment has taken hold. It's assumed that people no longer want to sit back and passively watch television at home: now they either want to create or actively participate. Colin doesn't believe that analysis is completely true; he thinks that people still do enjoy sitting back in a movie theater or at home to watch, but he thinks they also want to engage—in a more subtle way, though, than interacting with a computer or do-it-yourself videography. He believes that people want to use their imaginations to become engaged with the content and to embark on an emotional journey as they watch, feeling that they are participating in the experience.

The majority of mainstream film and television has not engaged the audience or invited watchers to go on a journey. It does not treat the audience with respect or understand the way in which people want to participate. Instead it tends to serve up predictable material with no demands or surprises. If you've seen the preview for an episode, all too often you've enjoyed the most engaging moments in advance.

I think this notion of the emotional connection between an audience and the content that they're engaged with is very, very central to how we need to look at the audience and the creator. For example, *Slumdog Millionaire* [directed by Danny Boyle and Loveleen Tandan] won the Oscar for best film. In the opening sequence the audience is taken on a camera's-eye view of a journey that they've never been on before. They don't quite know where they are going, but they know it's unfamiliar territory, and you're asking them to do that with you.

The emotional resonance of that movie is not just the function of a good story well told or the fact that it plays out a traditional "boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl" love story narrative. It also invites the audience to come on a journey with the characters. It doesn't answer all the questions, nor does it feed you the answers before the questions are asked.

If you hear producers talk about network television dramas or comedies, they will tell you that for success they need to signal the audience in advance about what is going to happen. I think that's why the networks have lost their audience—because it's boring, it's predictable, you know where it's going and the audience is ahead of the storyteller. That is why certain shows like *Lost* and *24* have been so engaging, because they have turned that idea on its head.

The impact of *The Sopranos* was that it took the gangster movie genre and said to the audience, "We're not going to give you any clues. You just need to come on this journey with us. Some of it will be familiar, some of it won't be familiar, but stick with us and come on this journey. We're going to constantly surprise you. We're going to kill off characters. We're going to have the characters you love do terrible things." For example, one of

the principal characters kills somebody while on a trip with his daughter to try and get her into a college, leaving her in a motel while he commits the murder.

Successful designs for popular media leave at least some of the form or content in a familiar format. If the audience is very interested in the content, you can play with form and bring the audience along a journey with you, or you could use a familiar form and play with the content, but if you play with form and content at the same time, it is very difficult to get a broad audience to accept it. Some of the most interesting art does play with the intersection of both form and content, but that limits the audience to a narrower segment. For popular culture, one has to carefully balance surprises that attract and familiarity that reassures. Colin gives an example of pushing that limit.

We made a movie called *Elephant* with Gus Van Sant that won the Palme d'Or. Gus came in after the Columbine shootings [in Colorado] and said, "I want to do a docudrama about Columbine," and we had a very interesting conversation about it. I remember saying to him, "Gus, anybody can do a docudrama about Columbine. You're Gus Van Sant. We're not taking advantage of you as a filmmaker if you do it as a docudrama. If you want to try to explore the roots of violence in schools in America today, doing a docudrama about Columbine is almost reductive, because it's going to make it specifically about Columbine.

I gave him a film called *Elephant* by a British director called Alan Clarke, which is about sectarian violence in Northern Ireland. The film was a series of scenes in which you watched events unfold without knowing who was Catholic and who was Protestant. You'd see a man standing at a urinal, then somebody in a coat walk in, pull out a gun and shoot the guys head off, and walk out. Fade to black. The next minute you'd see a teacher in a school sitting behind a desk marking some homework with the school lights being turned off by the janitor, and someone would walk into the classroom, shoot the teacher, and walk out again. Through the course of this drama you had no idea who was Catholic, who was Protestant, what the setup was, or why they were being killed, but by the time you finished



Filmmaking
courtesy of Vancouver Film School/Creative Commons

watching, it was an extraordinary statement about the futility of random violence that was tearing Northern Irish society apart.

The fact that the film that Gus made about Columbine was called *Elephant* was a tribute to Alan Clarke. That led Gus down another road altogether in terms of how he made the film. It plays with form in terms of time and place, in terms of the cinematography and the composition. It basically breaks every single traditional rule about storytelling, but because it's about Columbine and violence amongst children in schools, you go with it. It's an extraordinary film.

Consumers pay for HBO as a monthly subscription, often packaged with other programs, so the success or failure of any one show or film doesn't directly impact the bottom line. This allowed Colin to give the producers unusual freedom, as they were not driven by ratings, advertisers, or box

office. He tried to address underserved audiences, sometimes taking big risks that turned into big successes. In the very early days of HBO a lot of the programming was geared toward men, because broadcast television was primarily addressing women, and they wanted to present something different from the mainstream. Later, Colin wanted to broaden the audience to include women, so he decided to try something with “risky” content in hopes of attracting a new female audience.

We made a trilogy of films called *If These Walls Could Talk*, about abortion in America. One film was set in the fifties, another in the seventies, and the third in the nineties. We had Demi Moore, Sissy Spacek, and Cher in the stories, and they were very, very tough. In the first story you saw Demi Moore self-abort with a hanger. When we had preview screenings in New York we had people fainting in the aisles and had to call the EMS crews. It was unlike anything that anyone had seen before—very powerful, but it wasn't a polemic. It was an exploration of the decisions that women have to make.

Well, it got the most extraordinary audience on HBO. It just went through the roof. And suddenly we all looked at each other and said, “You know, women want something else. They don't just want the disease of the week, or the soap opera drama that network television is giving them. They want real stories about themselves where you really explore in an intelligent, smart way the sort of emotional journeys that women go on.” And *Sex in the City* was the direct descendent of that.

I think part of the excitement, the fun, is being able to take those creative risks that end up challenging and changing the conventional wisdom about what's doable and what isn't doable.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Colin is interested in how the Internet and social networking are giving content creators a new paradigm for thinking about the audience. Traditional demographics divide the audience by characteristics such as gender, economic status, age, and geography. Madison Avenue has used this type of analysis to sell advertising, but the information harvested on the Internet is eroding that kind of demographic chunking. Now the advertiser knows who participates in a special-interest group or groups with passionate interests in specific areas. As those groups transcend traditional boundaries, Colin wants to look at the audience in a different way, defining new and innovative programming based on that more distributed but well-informed analysis. He is not very interested in the groundswell of user-generated content.

I think the best film and television certainly entertains, but it does more than entertain; it illuminates, informs, and engages emotionally. At its very best, as any great art does, it enables the person viewing to look at the world with slightly different eyes—with a different perspective and point of view, and maybe have a new empathy with other people.

Filmmaking and television aspire to those high artistic ideals, beyond just being moving wallpaper, so I believe that there's the role of an artist in the middle of that. Although I embrace the notion of user-generated content and the democratization of production, I'm not sure that it necessarily results in more illuminating work. This is not to be elitist about it, as I certainly wouldn't want to do without it, but I'm not sure that one replaces the other. I think the challenge and the interesting thing is how the two worlds can live side by side.

There are certain sorts of forms of expression that will presumably disappear. The eight-track cassette doesn't exist any more, but the pencil still does—a piece of wood with a piece of lead in the middle of it, side by side with the computer. What interests me is the way these parallel

universes live side by side rather than replace the other. I think there's no difference at all between the way you create a drama for Hulu and for cable television. I do think that people's viewing habits have changed, but not the way they engage with the content. An audience today doesn't make any distinction between cable and television.

Certainly the entertainment landscape is beyond bewildering, but one thing we know is that in one form or another people will be at home watching entertainment on a screen. The screen may be a television monitor, a computer screen, a computer attached to a TV, or a TV attached to a computer. The content may be a download, a DVD, a broadband delivery, or whatever. They will be watching stuff at home in one form or another.

I think the need for societies to create stories to help people define themselves is central to the way societies hold themselves together, so that in the final analysis it's the content that matters!

COMMENTARY

Yes, content is king! Without good material, the arts of communication and presentation are hollow and meaningless. I admire the idealism with which Arthur Sulzberger Jr. links the mission of journalism and democracy, or Ira Glass extols the power of narrative, or Colin Callender believes that societies hold themselves together by creating stories to define themselves. But what does this imply for design? Is design merely the lackey who polishes the king's shoes, or instead the embodiment of the soul of content? I think it's worth taking a look at some examples from this chapter to examine the issues behind that question.

The Saturday edition of the *New York Times* newspaper is not so huge since most of the material is saved up for Sunday. Let's look at Saturday, January 23, 2010. There are three main sections, with section A covering international and national news and editorial comment, section B including business and sports, and section C about the arts, with weather on the back page. The glossy weekend magazine usually arrives on Sunday, but some carriers include it with the Saturday delivery.

On the same day the online version, [Nytimes.com](http://nytimes.com), has five main tabs on the home page: Today's Paper, Video, Most Popular, Times Topics, and Most Recent. The home page is the width of a single screen with several screens of height that you can scroll through to find news, blog links, and headlines from twenty-four subchannels. The Times Topics tab has a row of its own tabs giving access to most of these subchannels, but in not quite the same organization. The Most Recent tab offers access to real-time news with links via a list of headlines with single sentence explanations, plus a linked photomontage. The Most Popular tab aggregates traffic to display the most emailed, blogged, searched, and popular movies. The Video tab is a thing unto itself, closer in appearance to YouTube or Hulu than to the printed newspaper. The Today's Paper tab provides the strongest link

between physical and digital, with thumbnails of the front pages of the *New York Times* and the *International Herald Tribune*, comparable headlines, and a long list of material referencing the pages in the physical paper.

This comparison of the structure reveals that the design of the physical newspaper and the online version are very different. Content is king in the sense that the journalistic expertise and structure are essential to harvest the information and opinion for both versions, but this king is very hands off, not attempting to control the nature of the delivery of that information and opinion. Alice Rawsthorn sums it up nicely when she says, “The *New York Times* has really interrogated the Web and found ways of working well with it.” This has kept her visiting the site every day for over ten years. She points to the visual connection between the old-fashioned masthead on the paper and the finessed version online, encouraging the sense of a connected identity between the two. With the exception of the Today’s Paper tab, this is where the overlap in the reading experience ends. The online version is highly evolved to take advantage of all of those attributes of connectivity that the Internet offers, while the newspaper remains surprisingly similar to its past, offering the traditional satisfaction of scale and handling but without taking strides to redesign the experience in the way that the *Guardian* or *USA Today* have done. Alice Rawsthorn explains the leap forward that David Hillman created when he redesigned the *Guardian* to take advantage of the new high-quality printing technology, with mixed-font titles, a carefully thought-out grid for the layout, and a huge two-page photo in the centerfold.

I don’t believe in design as a lackey, providing a superficial surface to royal content. Rather, I see design as a synthesis of all the requirements that connect people to the experience that they have with something. This synthesis evolves through iterative efforts to improve the design, developing ways to present and communicate the content that is unique to each medium. You really can enjoy the news and opinion generated by the reporters and editors at the *New York Times* in different ways in the paper and online. On the same day you can discover different items and experience different rewards with the two. The content provides the basic material, but the design of its presentation in each medium separates it into versions. It’s the content and the medium combined that can be designed to yield a good reading and navigating experience.

Ira Glass has evolved an approach to radio that combines content and medium as a narrative flow, with anecdotes interspersed with reflection. When you listen to *This American Life*, he hooks you in to the story by leaving each anecdote hanging during the reflective commentary, so you

are waiting for the next episode. I like his example of the X-factor added to a banal story of a man coming out of the bathroom and seeing a kid down the hall. The X-factor is the mention that he has his glasses in his pocket, so you subconsciously realize that something strange or threatening is likely to happen soon. When radio is designed like this, it harnesses the imagination with a powerful emotional intimacy, comparable to that exerted by a great orator or preacher.

When Ira tried television, he found that the design needed to be different. In radio he had evolved an approach to presenting the content over a period of more than thirty years, so the design of the structure and presentation was highly evolved to fit perfectly with the characteristics of the medium. In television he found that intimacy is much harder to achieve, as every visual cue needs to support the audio to be convincing, and close-up shots of the face carry much of the emotional quality, but you lose the power of the listener’s imagination to fill in gaps. Film and television are complex and expensive, and even when they’re well coordinated and choreographed, you can only rarely get that emotional connection to the narrator that Ira achieves for every radio episode of *This American Life*. Film and TV need to be recorded in real time or reenacted to communicate successfully, whereas in radio you can ask people to reconstruct stories from the past. Good talkers can make excellent radio when they describe something interesting that happened to them.

Colin Callender explains the balance between intimacy and sit-back viewing for film and television. He points out that people want to have their emotions and imagination engaged when they are watching, and he derides much mainstream material for failing to invite the audience on a participatory journey. I like his example of the opening sequence in *Slumdog Millionaire*, where the audience is taken on a camera’s-eye view of a hectic run through the slums. It is the start of an invitation to the audience to come on a journey with the characters that continues throughout the film. Here again, you might think that content is king, in that the people and the place drive the effect, but the experience is skillfully designed to make the best of the medium. The team of filmmakers connected to the real slums in Mumbai, India, but they also know their craft of cinematography.

The stories told by Colin Callender and Ira Glass make us understand how challenging and complex it is to make successful film or television and why it is so expensive and time-consuming. In order to achieve the goal of letting the content appear to be king, we need producers like Colin who believe that their job is to enable the directors, writers, and actors to deliver the artistic vision. When the vision is supported, the audience can fill in

the blanks, feeling a sense of participation and engagement. Colin is also a realist about popular appeal, carefully balancing surprises that attract and familiarity that reassures.

IN THE NEXT CHAPTER, “LET THE TRUTH BE TOLD;” we meet some people who care most about the integrity of content. They see their roles to be primarily political—to delve into the truth behind the stories to reveal causes and implications.

