

Serial - A murder investigation...

 By [Anton Harber](#)

2 Feb 2015

Investigative journalists live in fear that they will spend months gathering and testing evidence in pursuit of what sounds like a great story but in the end just does not hold up and they are left empty-handed, having wasted months of their time - and probably lots of their employer's money. No longer...

An experimental US serial, called *Serial*, has changed that. Radio producer Sarah Koenig set out to investigate the guilt or innocence of a young man, Adnan Syed, who has served 15 years of a life sentence in Baltimore for killing his former girlfriend, Hae Min Lee. Syed has always maintained his innocence and there was little direct evidence to link him to the crime. He was convicted largely because of a witness who said that he had helped Syed bury the body. But the case was full of holes and unanswered questions, and his lawyer seemed to have been less than thorough in his defence. Opinions were divided and as many of his community believed him guilty as those who argued passionately for his innocence.

A rollercoaster ride

It helped that Koenig could interview Syed from prison and he proved to be charming and likeable, the victim was popular and smart, and the story was multi-layered. Was he victimised because he was Muslim? Why were there still holes in both his story and that of the person who fingered him?

But what made this different was that Koenig takes us with her through her investigation, played out over a [12-part podcast](#). She clearly starts by believing he is probably innocent, but as the case unravels her views shift back and forth, and she takes us on her roller-coaster journey of doubt and questioning. She investigates as the serial unfolds, so that she herself does not know how it will end.

I will try to avoid a spoiler for those who have not yet listened to it, but what matters is not so much the outcome as how compelling the story is along the way. And it is made this way because she does what so many investigative reporters hate to do: express doubt and uncertainty. We are there with her as she confronts and analyses conflicting evidence and testimony. Never has investigative journalism been so transparent.

Something different - and compelling

The result is a mix of Nancy Drew, Kojak and Truman Capote - except that it differs from the fiction cases because real life is so much more murky and unpredictable. And it differs from Capote in that Koenig's sometimes chatty, colloquial style has little of his elegance.

Serial is an offshoot from the iconic National Public Radio weekly programme, *This American Life*. If you don't know it, find it and listen, because host Ira Glass is one of the storytellers of our time, the Charles Dickens of public radio.

Of course, podcasting has the advantage that each episode can be as long as the story demands, without rigid radio-style timeframes. And you can listen where and whenever you want.

The programme's team decided to try something different by tracking one story over 12 episodes. Only the first *Serial* ran on traditional radio and the rest were released weekly as podcasts.

A coming of age

It took off, becoming the fastest-ever podcast to reach 5-million downloads (according to Apple) until it was reaching about 5-million a week. It topped the iTunes podcasting charts around the world (including SA) and quickly imprinted itself in online popular culture, with discussion raging everywhere from chat rooms to highbrow magazines. It has signalled the coming-of-age of podcasting, has changed the way we make and listen to "radio" and got us all thinking about fresh ways of storytelling.

For some, *Serial* raised ethical concerns. Is it right to put the families of both victim and accused through this torturous process, without knowing the outcome? Are journalists not meant to investigate first, establish the facts and then decide whether it is worth broadcasting? But what cannot be challenged is that *Serial* has been riveting to listen to, and has shown the enormous potential of long-form audio, however it is delivered.

I hope someone at the South African Broadcasting Corporation is listening.

• Also see [We probably won't get a SA Serial any time soon - here's why.](#)

ABOUT ANTON HARBER

Anton Harber, Wits University Caxton Professor of Journalism and chair of the Freedom of Expression Institute, was a Weekly Mail (now Mail & Guardian) founding editor and a Kagiso Media executive director. He wrote *Diepsloot* (Jonathan Ball, 2011), *Recht Malan* Prize winner, and co-edited the first two editions of *The A-Z of South African Politics* (Penguin, 1994/5), *What is Left Unsaid: Reporting the South African HIV Epidemic* (Jacana, 2010) and *Troublemakers: The best of SA's investigative journalism* (Jacana, 2010).

- Find bright new ways to connect to readers - 31 Jul 2015
- Publish and be damned in name of patriotism - 24 Apr 2015
- Criminal libel has no place in law books - 20 Mar 2015
- One step forwards, one back for democracy - 2 Mar 2015
- Investment in people keeps news groups afloat - 13 Feb 2015

[View my profile and articles...](#)

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>