

HANDS UP ALL THOSE WHO THINK **ADNAN DID IT?**

By Jonathan Ancer

If you don't know what I'm talking about here's a quick recap: Adnan Syed, a happy-go-lucky Maryland high school pupil, was sentenced in 2000 to life in jail for killing his ex-girlfriend Hae Min Lee, despite the fact the prosecution's case relied heavily on the testimony of one dodgy witness – Jay. For 15 years, Syed has maintained his innocence. Last year, the podcast *Serial*, a true-crime whodunit, re-examined the murder investigation. In each weekly episode journalist Sarah Koenig became an amateur detective – she spoke to Adnan in prison, revisited the crime scene, tracked down jury members and witnesses and pored over cellphone records and police records. Did Adnan do it? **She didn't know, but she was determined to find out.**

Serial was to podcasting what the Beatles was to music – revolutionary. It’s a podcast renaissance; it’s the Golden Age of Podcasting, print media headlines screamed. It sure was. Within a month Serial had a cult-following, including a #FreeAdnan hashtag, Adnan-did-it websites, memes, and more than 5-million subscribers, checking their smart phones every 30 seconds for a notification that the next episode was ready to download. One of the biggest winners was MailChimp (or is it Mailkimp?) the email marketing service which sponsored the series. MailChimp’s catchy advert earwormed its way into brand fame.

I’m not an early adopter – but when it came to listening to podcasts I was a pioneer, thanks mainly to my hate-hate relationship with South African radio. Podcasts changed my life because I no longer hated being in a car. I remember one evening making my way home from the CBD in peak hour traffic. The red-faced man in the car next to me slammed his fist into his hooter. The woman in the car behind threw up her hands. We were all captive to the gridlock but I couldn’t have been happier. It’s not like I was on my way to an appointment with the dentist that I was happy to be stuck in traffic.

Like everyone else in the city I had places to go and hands to shake but, unlike them, I had a feast of podcasts waiting for me: This American Life; The Gist; The Moth; BBC Radio 4’s Friday Night Comedy and RadioLab and Death, Sex + Money – the podcast Death, Sex + Money – not the real life death, sex and money.

It was while I was in a traffic jam that I listened to a This American Life episode about superheroes. Which superpower would you choose, asked Ira Glass: flight or invisibility? Flight. Definitely flight, I thought. Although imagine the stories I could get with invisibility?

Since becoming a podcast junkie I arrive home calm. Before podcasts I jumped from radio station to radio station, a slave to Sandy from Sandton, Barry from Belville and Eddie from Ficksburg’s inane opinions. But Steve Jobs saved me from radio hell when he launched the iPod in 2001. His super cool device not only revolutionised music storage, it also introduced a new platform for journalism. Podcasts – audio shows – about politics, sports, satire, science, literature, money and music were only a download away.

My podcast of choice is This American Life, an hour-long weekly show split into theme-based stories. It’s quirky, powerful, poignant and painstakingly researched; it’s story-telling at its gripping best.

Technology has made podcasts accessible – thanks to smartphones, millions of people walk

around with the internet in their pockets. Cars are being made with built-in internet capacity and free wifi will soon be the new Coca Cola – it will be available wherever you go (but unlike Coke it won’t give you diabetes).

The Serial effect has seen media houses around the world dive into the medium. A recent research survey showed that the numbers of listeners has multiplied and the number of podcasts produced has doubled. This is yet another example of how cellphones have become the consumer device of our age. Podcasts offer high engagement levels – it’s radio on demand, which you can listen to while commuting, cooking, walking and when you wake up at 3am from a nightmare about the imminent death of print media.

In the beginning podcasts were geek territory – made in garages and mostly about tech. But they have shot into the mainstream and have become well-produced, well-researched, slick productions. Another podcasts positive is that once you have subscribed you don’t have to go looking for the content, it finds you. Podcasts are easy to download, they are free (great for listeners; for podcasters, not so much), and they are of a high quality – so it’s not difficult to see why podcasts have become so popular.

Last year I realised that while the podcast industry is flourishing elsewhere I couldn’t find many local podcasts – local, it seems, is sleeker. So, while listening to StartUp, a podcast about a podcaster starting a podcast startup, I decided to launch a podcast startup called Sound Media Productions with Dan Dewes, a fellow podcast junkie who happens to be a sound engineer. However, we found that local media houses are not so quick to dive into podcasting, and editors don’t yet get podcasting’s potential for storytelling. Radio stations slap a segment of their show on their website and call it a podcast. Video may not have killed the radio star, but podcasting will.

We’re yet to crack the podcast business model but I believe excellent content will attract listeners who will bring advertisers to the party.

Who needs invisibility or flight? Helping to save South Africans from Sandy in Sandton, Barry in Belville and Eddie in Ficksburg, and reducing road rage on South African roads, is my superpower.

Here is the link to our website which features our podcasts:

<http://soundmp.wix.com/sound-media>

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