



## Sound Advice for Telling Stories

Dan Collison and Elizabeth Meister are masters at audio storytelling. Through their Michigan-based nonprofit, [Long Haul Productions](#), the husband and wife team has won virtually every major award in public broadcasting. At a time when more and more good causes are adding video to their websites to share stories, Collison and Meister offer four reasons why audio may be the wiser choice. [Full story](#). Please note: Apple Mail users may need to scroll down manually.

### Is Uber's Story Heading South?

If the life of a company is a story told in three acts, Uber has had a terrific Act I. Launched in 2010 to fill a space between taxis and limos, Uber was everything a tech start-up should be: disruptive, convenient, cool. In 2013, USA Today named Uber its tech company of the year, and entering 2015 the company's valuation has been placed as high as \$40 billion. But now Uber's story is entering Act II, and a fast start has suddenly become a bumpy ride. Whether you're an Uber customer or not, the company's twisting tale has a message for you. [Full story](#).

### Watch Winning Pitches by Nonprofits

On October 29th, ten nonprofits from the Greater Los Angeles area competed in the annual Social Innovation Fast Pitch competition. Each organization had three minutes to tell its story, and \$45,000 in cash and in-kind prizes were awarded to the most compelling pitches. The competition, which is hosted by the Los Angeles chapter of Social Venture Partners, was the culmination of two months of training and coaching, and was attended by approximately 500 members of the local nonprofit, philanthropic and business communities. See all ten pitches - including the award winners [here](#).



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"We usually have no problem convincing NPR junkies why stories that rely on basic audio recordings can be so absolutely powerful," says Collison. "But when it comes to our collaborative work with nonprofits and foundations, we don't always have an easy sell." His partner Meister explains why: "Our clients say, 'We can't just have someone talking. Our audience needs to see *something*.'"



Dan Collison and Elizabeth Meister on location at Dog Mountain in Vermont

And all too often, Collison and Meister point out, what the audience sees is mediocre. I'm inclined to agree: just consider the videos you've seen in social media feeds, on websites and at conferences. For every great production there are many more clunkers: cheesy, predictable, overly long and often looking as if they were shot on someone's iPhone.

"When we see these bad videos," says Meister, "we return to our mantra - it's the story, stupid!" As further proof of the enduring power of audio storytelling, she points to the oral history project StoryCorps, public radio shows like "All Things Considered", and "Serial," which recently became the most downloaded podcast in the history of the form.

"A human story, well-told, is enough to capture an audience's attention," says Collison. "People don't need to see something to engage." And if you're still not convinced, Collison and Meister offer these four reasons to reconsider audio:

**1. Audio recording allows for more intimate interviews.** People are generally more comfortable being interviewed for audio than they are with video crews and cameras. Equipment is small, and crews are tiny. You can interview people on their couch or at their living room table, in an office or a park. Nobody's keeping tabs on anyone's hairdos and wardrobes. It's far more comfortable, and that's clear in the result. "We can vouch for this," says Meister. "One foundation we worked with insisted on an on-camera interview,

but the interviewees couldn't stop sweating under the hot lights. Thousands of dollars later, the shoot was scrapped."

**2. Audio is less expensive than video.** Recording requires little more than some degree of quiet - no worries about those lights or cameras - and it's easier to capture people on-site as they walk around, work and do the things they're most passionate about. It can also be surprisingly easy to line up production help; for example, StoryCorps' [Door to Door](#) department brings interview facilitators to record volunteers, employees, and beneficiaries in one-on-one conversations on site.

**3. Audio can multitask.** It can be used in social media, it can be produced into a story for your local public radio station, and it can be transcribed and used as the basis for print newsletters/annual reports/newspaper stories. Organizations can produce a version for funders, another to entice volunteers, and another to podcast to a general audience, all without much additional cost.

**4. If you still want visuals, strong audio is a great place to begin.** With a great audio story at the heart, you'll be able to clearly assess how visuals might best complement and extend the narrative. And you'll be in a better position to produce professional quality material that's within your budget. As an example, here's a [visual piece](#) that Collison helped craft in collaboration with StoryCorps.

To these four reasons, Collison and Meister add one piece of advice. "When you can, set aside time with your board members, staff, volunteers, interns, and the people who benefit from your work. Listen, be curious and patient, and we're convinced you'll better understand the transcendent power that these human voices have in communicating your organization's good works."

[^ back to top](#)

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Uber's practice of jacking up fares at times of high demand - what the company calls "surge pricing" - has not gone over well with customers. As NPR reported, Uber "has raised fares sometimes to hundreds of dollars at a moment when people need it the most." If you've ever contacted Uber during rush hour, you know exactly how irritating this can be.

There have been multiple reports of Uber ordering and then cancelling rides from competitors such as Lyft and GETT - as many as 5,000 bogus requests according to The New York Times. Such underhanded practices led CBS News to run a story entitled, "Is Uber a Dirty Company?"

And then there was the BuzzFeed story about an Uber executive who suggested his company should retaliate against investigative journalists by digging up dirt on them. While the executive, Senior VP Emil Michael, claimed the remarks were made off the record and the company has subsequently disavowed them, online chatter about Uber's bad behavior has continued to escalate.

So, what does all this have to do with you? Consider the remarks of Jan Dawson, a tech industry analyst, who was interviewed about Uber in The New York Times last month. "The dangerous thing in tech is narrative," Dawson told the Times. "The more stories that come out about Uber behaving badly...the risk is that it starts to become the main story about the company...."

Dawson could just as easily have been talking about your sector, except I would contend that narrative is not so much "dangerous" as it is "precious." Whatever kind of organization you work for, there's a story in your audience's heads about who you are, what you do, and how you do it. Your reputation - possibly your single most valuable asset - is inextricably bound up in that story.

Right now, Uber is losing control of its story. Whether or not the company can regain control and repair its reputation remains to be seen. But whatever the outcome, Uber's story already stands as a cautionary tale about our own stories. Untended, they can veer dangerously off course. But with proper attention and regular upkeep, they can take us wherever we want to go.

[^ back to top](#)

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To reach Andy directly, please call (323) 464-3956 or send an email to [andy@thegoodmancenter.com](mailto:andy@thegoodmancenter.com).

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