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BEYOND THE IVORY TOWER

From Academic to Radio Producer

How does a Ph.D. whose work focused on Norwegian killer whales wind up in radio?

By [SUSAN BASALLA MAY](#)

National Public Radio provides the soundtrack for many graduate students slogging away on their dissertations. It certainly did for Ari Daniel Shapiro when he was pursuing his doctorate at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution. While processing the data he had collected about Norwegian killer whales, he listened to *Radio Lab*, *The World*, and *All Things Considered*. Now, just a couple years later, Shapiro is an independent radio producer whose stories have aired on some of those very programs, as well as others.

Shapiro did not imagine that his Ph.D. in biological oceanography would lead to a career in radio, but in retrospect, the transition makes sense. He had long sought a way to connect his love of science to his commitment to social and environmental justice. Even the theater groups he participated in during graduate school helped him make the leap to radio. His story is an excellent example of how keeping an ear closely attuned to your own passions during graduate school can make you successful not only in academe, but also in finding fulfilling work beyond it.

Question: Why did you decide to go to graduate school?

Shapiro: During college, I did an internship at the Woods Hole institution. I worked with a graduate student on the vocalizations of killer whales and just loved it. I loved listening to the calls and thinking about how the whales might be interacting. The natural environment has always interested me, but nothing before that experience had held my attention in the same way. At the end of the summer, I asked Peter Tyack, my adviser from that lab, for his advice on how I could do more science like that. He was wonderful and helped connect me with his colleagues at the University of St. Andrews, in Scotland. I received a Fulbright to do a master-of-philosophy degree there, spending a year working with gray-seal pups. The next year I lived in New York City and participated in Avodah, a service-corps program where I was a legal advocate for low-income clients. Afterward I began work on my Ph.D.

Question: What sort of nonacademic experience did you gain in graduate school?

Shapiro: I've always had a high threshold for doing lots of different things at once. I think balance is crucial, although that's different for everyone. For me, I need hefty doses of entirely different experiences to feel grounded. I'd been involved in theater since middle school and found that it became especially important in graduate school. Some semesters I spent most of my days in the lab or in the library, working by myself. But I also liked being around other people and participating in structured activities, and theater provided that. In a theater group, you form a community, you have concrete goals, and you get to exercise a different kind of creative energy. It put my head in a totally different kind of space.

No one ever raised an eyebrow at the time I spent on theater — MIT and Woods Hole are great that way. When you work, you work hard, but you can also devote yourself to outside interests and passions. My adviser was supportive as well. We talked a lot about science, but he was also excited to hear about my theater endeavors.

Question: How did you decide to leave academe?

Shapiro: In retrospect, I realize that you can do a lot of other things with a graduate degree besides academe. At the time, I'd always heard about the versatility of a law degree, but I'd never really connected that kind of versatility with a Ph.D. before.

At a certain point, I just took a step back and considered the elements I wanted in my next professional phase: intellectual stimulation, social and environmental justice, science, and interaction with people. I'd been thinking about journalism as one way to pull together those interests. I really enjoyed listening to Robert Krulwich's science stories on NPR, for example, and thought that seemed like an interesting path.

My adviser was very supportive. He has a broad view of the possibilities of a graduate degree. When I told him I was considering science journalism or public policy after finishing my degree, he encouraged me and provided additional contacts and ideas in those arenas.

Question: How did you get started in radio?

Shapiro: I started thinking seriously about radio as a possible career during the summer before my last year in graduate school. So I volunteered to speak briefly at an ocean-science program for journalists offered by Woods Hole. When I gave my three-minute presentation on my research, I started by saying that I was interested in radio. After my talk, one of the journalists suggested that I check out www.transom.org. It's a resource for anyone interested in public radio. The Web site features archived stories, interviews with producers, advice on what kind of microphone to buy, etc. Transom's mission is to get new voices on the radio, to hear from the unheard. I loved that — it's a social-justice mission. And by remarkable coincidence, Transom, and its parent organization, Atlantic Public Media, are located in Woods Hole, next-door to the building where I had been having nearly weekly meetings with one of my committee members. I'd walked by it for years, never knowing what it was.

I set up an informational interview with Samantha Broun, a radio producer at Atlantic Public Media, and she and her colleagues invited me to produce short 30-to-60-second pieces featuring scientists talking about their research. I enjoyed it immensely — I found myself so excited that I couldn't go to

sleep at night until I finished a piece. They were happy with my work, and they strongly encouraged me to do more, connecting me with other stations and programs.

Question: So what exactly does an independent radio producer do?

Shapiro: An independent radio producer dreams up story ideas and then pitches them to different radio programs. Since I'm a freelancer, I have a lot of choice over the kinds of stories I want to pitch. In the public-radio world, I've found my niche telling stories about science, some related to my Ph.D. research area and others that aren't.

Once an editor accepts an idea I've pitched, I start gathering tape: interviewing people and recording background sounds to help create scenes in the story. I try to be creative about bringing sound into a piece. For example, I recently finished a story about carbon nanotubes that opened with an interview with a chemist (and former graduate-school classmate of mine). Because some new baseball bats are made with nanotubes, I conducted part of the interview at a batting cage, and focused my initial questions on how the listener might encounter such materials.

The next step is to iterate the script a few times with an editor to make sure I've got the story, narration, and flow right. Sometimes I provide my tape and voice-over to the radio station, and they mix and produce the piece. Other times I assemble the finished product myself.

Question: How does your graduate degree help in your work?

Shapiro: Knowing the science community, and how to engage with it, is helpful. I try to follow developments in science at a technical level and then translate them for a general audience, similar to what I did while teaching during graduate school. My background in theater has also been very useful. All those productions have paid off in terms of setting a scene, doing voice-over work, and creating a narrative arc.

Question: What lessons have you had to learn or skills have you had to acquire in order to be successful in radio?

Shapiro: Having the split identity of being a scientist-turned-journalist can be difficult. I have to find the right balance between detail and summary. Before I decided to devote myself to radio full time, I struggled with dividing myself between the two worlds.

For example, last summer I attended a conference in Paris where I both presented a paper on my dissertation research and sought interviews for several pieces I had pitched to PRI's *The World*. So I'd spend half the day at the conference talking to people about my dissertation, and then I'd grab a microphone and hunt someone down to answer questions about what Bach music sounds like on Venus.

I had a hard time choosing, because I loved both worlds. But I finally decided to commit myself to radio, and I've been quite happy. The other thing that can be challenging for me is that I take feedback very seriously. There's a level of responsibility that comes with making radio stories. Early on I made a small factual error in a piece but didn't realize it until the story aired. That was hard for me. Now I try to send at least parts of the script to the scientists I've interviewed. I also take listener feedback

earnestly. And part of pitching is that you're constantly being rejected, so that can be tough, too.

Question: What advice would you give current graduate students who may be interested in radio careers?

Shapiro: One of the great things about this business is there are opportunities if you look for them, and it's straightforward to get the basic gear you'll need. If you want to do radio, set up a meeting with your local public-radio station. Tell them you're interested in science radio or arts radio or whatever kind of radio you want to do. Is there a local reporter you like? Ask to meet for coffee. Many people are involved in making a radio piece, so try e-mailing the producers or editors of a story or program you like. If they don't get back to you, contact them again. You could also try your campus radio station and your university news office. Radio stations are always looking for content, and it's a great chance to learn how to use the equipment.

Also, there are tons of podcasts out there — lots of places to get things aired online and build up your portfolio. Think about departments and organizations you've been involved with, and talk to them about producing media content. And, of course, I'd recommend you check out Transom.

More broadly, think creatively about how you can apply your training to a number of possible fields. Leverage your degree and consider the applicable skills it lets you demonstrate: an ability to solve complex problems, a commitment to working on and completing a long-term project, and the integration of disparate areas of inquiries into a unique whole.

But no matter what you do, listen to your heart to find something that sustains you and makes you happy.

Susan Basalla May is the author, with Maggie Debelius, of "So What Are You Going to Do With That?": Finding Careers Outside Academia, recently released in a revised and updated edition by the University of Chicago Press. For an archive of previous Beyond the Ivory Tower columns, see [http://chronicle.com/jobs/news/archives/columns/beyond the ivory tower](http://chronicle.com/jobs/news/archives/columns/beyond_the_ivory_tower).

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