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Click that dial!

Internet radio is now a global phenomenon, with stations offering a dazzling array of output. But which are the best? Pascal Wyse and Alexis Petridis pick their top spoken word and music sites

Pascal Wyse and Alexis Petridis

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I was recently told about an old tape of Orson Welles exploding with fury during the recording of an advert. I tried to find it online. It took less than a minute. The near infinite resources of the web are a godsend - but sometimes all that choice can leave you paralysed. This is certainly the case with internet radio, once seen as a novelty, now a global phenomenon, with stations taking music and the spoken word where they've never been before, and all just a click away. Overleaf are a few of our favourites, starting points that will hopefully get you hunting for more.

This American Life

A character in the TV series *The OC* described *This American Life* thus: "Is that that show by those hipster know-it-alls who talk about how fascinating ordinary people are?" With two prestigious Peabody awards to its name, plus numerous other trophies picked up during their show's 13-year existence, presenter Ira Glass and his team can live with the jibe - in fact, Glass even used it in one live broadcast.

Divided into "acts", each hour-long episode takes a theme and examines it in different ways, through monologue, interview, investigation, reportage or fiction - contributions that are threaded together by Glass. *This American Life* gymnastically changes in tone each week, with subjects such as early (and shockingly bungled) attempts at cryonics, how the Onion pushes its writers to come up with the most hilarious headlines, and the tale of two girls who were switched at birth and ended up being brought up by the wrong parents for more than 40 years. Ordinary people, maybe - but they have mind-boggling tales to tell.
thislife.org

Rob Long's Martini Shot

Although not quite as buttock-twistingly uncomfortable as *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, the weekly *Martini Shot*, from Cheers producer Rob Long, is a four-minute dose of the farcical shenanigans required for people like him to keep afloat in Hollywood. Long takes a swipe at the business with a clenched fist, albeit one hidden under lots of self-deprecation - after all, he's got to keep working in Tinseltown. Alongside the embarrassing lunches and bungled pitches, Long takes a serious look at how TV and film are getting to grips with the internet and the shifting sands of audiences and money.

kcrw.com/etc/programs/ma

Sound Transit

The front page of Sound Transit looks like a portal for a chic travel agent. Inside, you are invited to "book a transit": you specify a city and country for the start and end points of your journey, as well as the number of stopovers. Dipping into its growing archive of field recordings from around the world, the site then mixes you an MP3 journey, taking you through sounds captured in the locations specified. Each section fades gently through to the next to create an audio trip. You can download or send the MP3 to friends - or just search for individual sounds and locations. These phonographic communities are building audio maps of cities, allowing you to hear - as well as see - around the world.

soundtransit.nl

Radio AM 1710 Antioch OTR

"I'm just a footloose cowpuncher that's anxious to make some money." So said the Lone Ranger back in 1944. And now, thanks to Antioch Old Time Radio - broadcasting from a house just inland from Lake Michigan - you can spend your whole life listening to lines like that, from US radio dramas from the 30s, 40s and 50s. There are 18,000 shows on the server, divided into police, detective, science fiction, suspense, mystery, family comedy and more. If only laptops came in Bakelite.

radio.macinmind.com

Philosophy Bites

Melvyn Bragg gets away with opening his BBC show *In Our Time* with lines such as: "Hello, in 1822 the Irish philosopher William Thompson put forward a theory . . ." But generally, in broadcast, things have to be more digestible. *Philosophy Bites* is a 10- to 20-minute show where philosophers are interviewed on "bite-sized" topics such as "Do you own your own body? If not, who does?" and "Can a nation be collectively responsible for actions?" David Edmonds and Nigel Warburton, philosophers and broadcasters, take turns

to run these miniature debates. The episode with Hugh Mellor, discussing the nature of tense and time, is mesmerisingly convoluted.

nigelwarburton.typepad.com/philosophy_bites/

Lost and Found Sound by the Kitchen Sisters

Buster Keaton singing at a party, the recordings of a 19-year-old marine in the Vietnam war, a five-year-old Sofia Coppola being interviewed by her father, Francis Ford . . . these and many other recordings have been unearthed by Davia Nelson and Nikki Silva, aka the Kitchen Sisters, in collaboration with Jay Allison. Most of these treasures are sent in by the public, perhaps people who had stumbled across a box of old tapes in an attic - and they are played as part of National Public Radio's All Things Considered show, which encourages listeners to phone or send in stories of recordings of interest. Also available through the Kitchen Sisters website is their sonic memorial to the World Trade Center - another idea that relied upon the public sending in recordings and phone messages related to 9/11.

kitchensisters.org and npr.org

Speechification

Speechification gathers the best - as it hears it - of speech radio: "A blog of Radio 4. Not about Radio 4 but of it. We point to the bits we like, the bits you might have missed, the bits that someone might have sneakily recorded. Other speech radio from around the world will no doubt find its way here too." It's a credit to the BBC that there's so much of its output featured here, but there is also choice material from other international stations. You can even hear Will Self talking about psychogeography while he walks from La Guardia airport to Manhattan.

speechification.com

Radio Lab

Presenters Jad Abumrad and Robert Krulwich recently asked their readers whether their show was a "science" show or not. Listeners emailed to say that they had never considered it a science show because it was too "groovy and playful". As the presenters' biographies reveal, Emmy-winning Krulwich has "explored the structure of DNA with a banana, explained arbitrage by wearing Groucho glasses and illustrated the Texaco-Pennzoil battle with Barbie and Ken dolls"; while Abumrad is also a musician who has written scores for films. The result is a polished combination of interviews, anecdotes and experiments. Laughter - a show examining why we have evolved to chuckle - features a scientist tickling a rat.

wnyc.org/shows/radiolab

Touch Radio

Touch, an independent arts organisation that turned 25 last year, is home to artists such as Christian Fennesz, Biosphere and Chris Watson. Touch Radio features challenging and entertaining material, including field recordings, interviews and live performances. There are audio diaries from Chris Watson, where he illuminates his work as a wildlife sound recordist in the Galapagos Islands, taking in the Alcedo volcano. If you are truly tired of words by this stage, you will find an antidote in Touch 10: The Bits Inbetween by Vicki Bennett, whose own show on WFMU, a glorious mashup (peoplelikeus.org), will leave you in a spin. touchradio.org.uk

Pascal Wyse

From dubstep to Danny DeVito:

Sub FM

Acclaimed, award-winning station dealing in what it terms "online pirate soundz". Its backbone is dubstep and grime, but the remit stretches from roots reggae to sub-genres so cutting edge you occasionally wonder if they made them up. What, for example, is "niche"?

subfm.com

WFMU-FM 91.1 FM

Home to an acclaimed country and western show hosted by singer Laura Cantrell, WFMU describes its output thus: "Rock'n'roll, 78rpm records, jazz, psychedelia, hip-hop, hand-cranked wax cylinders, punk rock, gospel, exotica, R&B." And, if that's not enough, there's "Andrew Lloyd Webber soundtracks in languages other than English".

wfmu.org

FIP

Largely presenter-free French station, with an implausibly eclectic playlist. A typical selection involves Cameroonian singer Sally Nyolo, followed by Jethro Tull, the theme from The Godfather, then Serge Gainsbourg.

radiofrance.fr/chaines/fip/endpoint/index.php

Rock-It Radio

One of the joys of internet radio is the way it gives a global voice to monomaniacal music fans. Mock their trainspotterish obsessions if you want, but they know what they're talking about. Rock-It Radio takes the gold, collating doo-wop, rockabilly and related shows from around the world - including game attempts at recreating the 1950s radio experience, jive-talking DJs and all.

rockitradio.net

KCRW

Another US public radio station, this time broadcast out of Santa Monica college and famed for its influential Morning Becomes Eclectic show. Its live sessions are great (recent visitors include Spiritualized, Goldfrapp and Vampire Weekend), while the rest of the station's music programming is fascinating - not least its guest DJ series, which recently featured Danny DeVito playing opera.

kcrw.com

Erol Alkan

The hip DJ, producer and brains behind London's legendary Trash nightclub hosts a series of consistently superb mixes on his website; you can subscribe via iTunes. Those under his own name tend towards electro and indie, while those from Beyond the Wizards' Sleeve find him in partnership with Richard Norris of the Grid, playing obscure 60s psychedelia, kitschy soundtracks and their own "nu-Balearic" remixes of current artists. Many are recorded live in clubs, injecting a palpable sense of dancefloor excitement.

erolalkan.co.uk

Resonance FM

Rightly famed for producing some of the most avant-garde radio in the UK, Resonance was the home of Talking a Life for a Walk, in which a woman recorded herself perambulating around London with her 18-month-old son while playing the saxophone. It also plays brilliant music largely ignored elsewhere, devoting shows to krautrock, Middle Eastern pop, dub reggae and trad folk. Particularly recommended is Max Tundra's splendidly eclectic Rotogravure, where disco collides with afrobeat, post-rock, folk, techno and (occasionally) the Buggles.

resonancefm.com

Alexis Petridis

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