

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

April 23, 2007

This American Backlash

Filed under: [critics & curators](#) — alecsothblog @ 12:10 am

Have you noticed the brewing *This American Life* backlash? Along with Jen Bekman's [recent tirade](#) and an [Onion spoof](#), Nancy Franklin has a [negative review](#) in the New Yorker. Like Bekman, she begins her piece with an apology:

"One wants very much to like "This American Life"—to love it—because the people who make it are so obviously thoughtful, intelligent, and respectful of their subjects."

Franklin struggles to pinpoint her frustrations. "A certain amount of smugness comes through," she says, "though it is hard to locate precisely."

I've spent much of this weekend thinking about *This American Life* and the nature of cultural backlashes. A few theories:

- We quickly tire of anything highly original that is produced within a conventional context
- Aficionados want to destroy anything that becomes popular
- It is culturally beneficial to limit the influence of highly influential work.

But maybe the problem with *This American Life* is the formula. In the New Yorker review, Franklin quotes host Ira Glass on the structure of the show:

There's an anecdote, that is, a sequence of actions where someone says 'this happened then this happened then this happened'—and then there's a moment of reflection about what that sequence means...It's the structure, essentially, of a sermon; you hear a little story from the Bible, then the clergy person tells you what it means.

I've spent way too much time on this lovely Sunday trying to come up with a sermon on cultural backlashes. I don't know what they mean. You tell me.

17 Comments

1. I think a definite part of the equation is that the more popular X becomes, the more some people can't stand X. This is basically your "Aficionados want to destroy anything that becomes popular" argument. But I think another part of the equation is that lots of people are followers and/or don't want to rock the boat. Monday morning they hear people talking about how much they loved this weekend's episode of *This American Life*, and they think, "Hmm, I'll check it out." Next weekend, they do—and they can't stand it. But the next time the *TAL* conversation comes up, rather than speak up and say, "You know, Ira Glass's voice drives me crazy," they just nod politely, change the subject to *Fresh Air*, or worse yet, chime in and say they love it, too, even though they secretly hate it. These people are waiting, desperately waiting, for people like *New Yorker* reviewers or New York gallery owners to come forward and voice the opinion they've long held themselves. When they hear it—*voilà!*—they finally feel free to express that same opinion. So what feels like a backlash has really been brewing all along.

That's my guess at least.

Comment by Liz — April 23, 2007 @ 12:59 am

2. "wake up and smell what youre shovelling"

Comment by Jeff — April 23, 2007 @ 8:47 am

3. I am a fan of *This American Life*, which basically means I enjoy up to 30% of what they put on. I think I can come up with a couple reasons for a backlash:

1. What's with all the speech impediments? Every single one of the correspondents has some weird quirky vocal handicap; they might as well call the show *This American Lisp*. It's cute and endearing at first, but after awhile it's just, you know... Dude, you're a radio presenter. See a speech pathologist already.

2. The radio show is on NPR or PRI or whatever — public radio. It's free. The new TV show is on Showtime. That's super-expensive pay cable. So there goes their public broadcasting cred. Way to alienate your core audience, guys!

Comment by james — April 23, 2007 @ 10:05 am

4. I'm amazed at the power of having an opinion. Rather, at the power of expressing an opinion. I wish people would do it more often, with the caveat that the opinions are expressed without the insistence that it's right, and those who disagree are wrong. Almost every time I express a strong opinion I get a lot of email telling me how cool it is that I'm brave and speaking out. (For the record, it's not bravery. It's usually poor impulse control.)

When something is new, or different, people become infatuated with it. Usually because it speaks to a broad audience in a way that's fresh, yet resonant. Those who feel misunderstood have a glimmer of hope, but also it eats away at their individuality. People like not being like everyone else, even if it makes them lonely sometimes. Feeling like everyone understands you means you're just like everyone else and not that many people crave that level of belonging. (At least the people I know. I could be totally off base.)

Something cannot be forever new. *The Sopranos* was riveting for several seasons. It was new and different and normalized pathology. And it let us all feel like we know the mobsters next door. And there was some outrage and cage-rattling about how the show was a reflection of the erosion of our nation's morality, yadda yadda. Um, yea. And now, it's old. We know that they're just like us, those mobsters are, and that's ultimately kind of boring. Don't you think? First there was a backlash, and now: lack of interest. (The lack of interest being worse than the backlash if you ask me.)

I think backlash, generally speaking, is a good thing. It forces conversation. It coaxes me to put my finger on why I feel a certain way, and then I have to figure out how to articulate it. *TAL* and Ira have my grudging admiration – I really can't stand it, but in a *memorable* way. I like having my buttons pushed once in a while.

The cycle is generally the same whether we're talking about ideas, or things or people: We fall in love, we fight and then we just stop caring.

Comment by [Jen Bekman](#) — April 23, 2007 @ [1:04 pm](#)

5. I don't have cable (not for a snobby I don't like tv reason I actually love tv and would watch more if I could, it's purely a money thing) so I haven't seen the tv version although I don't imagine it being that great. That being said the radio show is one of the highlights of my week, to be honest I love listening to people talk on the radio, The reason I don't think the tv show is probably very good is that part of the beauty of talk radio and *TAL* in particular is imagining the stories visuals, I don't want to see any of it I just want to listen, it's kind of like when a movie is made of your favorite book it's never the same and almost always worse.

Comment by [doug mcgoldrick](#) — April 23, 2007 @ [2:51 pm](#)

6. For the curious without cable, you can watch [Episode One](#) online on the Showtime site.

Comment by [Jen Bekman](#) — April 23, 2007 @ [4:08 pm](#)

7. [...] I confess to buying one book solely on the basis of its cover – the quote on a specific volume from Penguin's Great Ideas series seemed apropos to the conversation stirred up over on Alec's blog about cultural backlashes. (They are also gorgeous little books – even the 37 Signals dudes agree.) Anyway, back to the book, which is William Hazlitt's *The Pleasure of Hating*. Says he: Love turns, with a little indulgence, to indifference or disgust: hatred alone is immortal. [...]

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8. I enjoy a good story. They are hard to find these days. I think *TAL* hearkens back to a time when radio was the connection to the world. It has that nostalgic quality to it even when talking about current day issues. It is amusing and heartbreaking and a little voyeuristic to listen to *TAL*, so I do (because I like that kinda thang). It's like that dirty little secret that you don't tell anyone about because it's oh-so-delicious and a little scandalous all at the same time.

Comment by [dawn](#) — April 23, 2007 @ [11:34 pm](#)

9. to james, comment #3

public radio is not free. and while we're on the subject of cable tv, i wouldn't be surprised if one of the more successful arguments that gets people to finally join is this guilt trip: "look how much you pay a month for cable. 30? 50? 70? now ask yourself if \$10 p/m isn't too much for all the time you spend with npr."

Comment by [philip bowen](#) — April 24, 2007 @ [2:21 pm](#)

10. *TAL* is hipster BS. kinda like the self-important writing of David Eggers. Glass wears the hipster uniform well :black rimmed specks.
I agree with Jen on this one.

Comment by [J.M. Giordano](#) — April 24, 2007 @ [3:38 pm](#)

11. I love that show.

As long as they keep doing what their doing, i'm sure i'll be constantly amazed and inspired.

That said, someday i may just tire of the show. And that's okay too. I won't try to come up with some reason to dislike the show, I'll just move on.

I think people, myself included, are propensed to trash something as a response to an increasing amount of meta-information they hear about it.

I guess it's a result of me placing value on rarity.

Example: the more I hear about a secret little band I love from my co-workers the greater my propensity to move on to something new, to dig deeper to find that next hunk of gold.

Comment by [Rob](#) — April 24, 2007 @ [5:39 pm](#)

12. I'm definitely a fan. But if I want the most bang for my buck for pure entertainment value on the radio- it's Dr. Laura every time!

Now go do the right thing...

Comment by [Stan Banos](#) — April 25, 2007 @ [11:33 am](#)

13. I think that what caught my attention initially with TAL was that it was in some way innovative – either in form, intensity, retrospective approach, something. So I listened to it for a while. Then I stopped. Whatever the reason. Probably I had to work. When I tuned in again, I thought, “Wait, this is a rerun.” But it wasn't. The show reached a position and then it merely hovered. It began for me as innovative, simply because I hadn't heard it before. But after listening a bit, it became a monotone. I changed, it didn't, I stopped listening. I think backlash comes from there – the audience changes, perhaps as a result of listening to the show, but the show remains effectively static and slowly but surely falls behind its audience.

Plus it is a lot of talking about feelings and not actually about doing. Except maybe doing an radio show. The Prairie Home Companion for the grown children of parents who listened to Prairie Home Companion ad nauseum.

Comment by [J Ake](#) — April 25, 2007 @ [9:14 pm](#)

14. Speaking of backlash...

http://www.theonion.com/content/news/this_american_life_completes

Comment by [Brett Kallusky](#) — April 26, 2007 @ [5:01 pm](#)

15. [...] I recently mentioned the emerging This American Life backlash. But this is pretty gentle stuff. If you want venom, read what people have said about Garrison Keillor over the years. [...]

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16. [...] I am quite pleased about the mounting cultural backlash against bottled water. I've posted links to a couple of related articles in my del.icio.us bookmarks and then came across another one this morning (via TMN's always excellently curated headlines) over on Slate. [...]

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17. [...] How does jumping the shark figure in to This American Backlash? [...]

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