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The Art of Radio Documentary

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*If we had moved to Oslo,
we wouldn't have lasted for many days...*

For many years, I have been a devoted fan of radio documentaries. Back in the 1980s and 1990s I used to record some of the documentaries on my old Phillips cassette recorder. When digital technology replaced such tapes, I put them in a drawer. To make a radio documentary, you only need a good voice recorder and a talent to connect with people. Listening to a good radio documentary, you get the feeling of participating in the scenes that the journalist has recorded on tape. The story unfolds before you, rich with character and detail, as people present their lives “unfiltered,” without the usual interjections from experts.

In the early 1990s, the famed Norwegian journalist Birger Amundsen visited Nordmandset, a small Sámi fishing village in the western part of Finnmark County, in Northern Norway. At its height in the early 1960s, about 40–50 people lived in this village. Thirty years later, two brothers in their late 50s were the only people left. The authorities saw no future for the small fishing hamlets along the endless Norwegian coastline. The fishing fleet was modernized, and fishermen started using larger boats and delivering their stock to larger villages. Women entered the workforce and got paying jobs, and the educational system gave free access for people of all backgrounds to pursue higher education. For many small hamlets, this meant that the young people moved away, especially women, and they never moved back.

In an effort to document a vanishing culture, Birger Amundsen – himself from Kjøllefjord, a fishing village in Finnmark not far from Nordmandset – made a radio documentary in Nordmandset about its two last inhabitants: the brothers Eilert and Hans Karlsen. The documentary was titled *Ikke langt fra veien*: “not far from the road.” It was broadcast in 1992 by the Norwegian Broadcasting Cooperation (NRK). I have listened to this particular documentary now and again over the years, always amazed by the way the brothers relate to the tough nature surrounding them, and the way they talk about how to handle their *sjark* – a traditional fishing boat, 18–28 feet long with a diesel motor – in stormy weather. They lived their whole life fishing at the edge of the Barents Sea, among the roughest waters in the world. In recent years, Hans had been fishing alone while Eilert looked after everything on land – the pier, the pier-house and the general store (only open in the summertime, when the people that moved away, along with tourists, come for vacation). Eilert also delivered the mail, when needed.

In this documentary, Amundsen gives us some background information. He tells us that Eilert and Hans are Sea-Sámi, and that they have lived at Nordmandset all their lives. Their world is this little, vacated fishing hamlet and the fjords and peninsula surrounding it. They have grown into this landscape. “It’s good medicine to live in a place like this,” one of them says. Eilert had visited the capital Oslo once, 25 years before, and concluded, “If we had moved to Oslo, we wouldn't have lasted for many days.” Hans had visited the nearest

village Hammerfest twice (300km away), the last time as an emergency trip to the main county hospital. “My first visit to a hospital, and I was in my fifties.”

Hans shows Amundsen his small house, and his newly bought 28-inch colour television, and suggests they sit down in the living room for a coffee, since it is warmer there. But Amundsen asks if they could sit in the kitchen, by the window, because there they can look – Hans quickly cuts him off. They’re both aware of the same thing: The best conversations happen in the kitchen, sitting on each side of the table by the window. Amundsen knows that being by the kitchen window is of the utmost importance to get a smooth conversation.

Coffee is put on the kettle, cups put on the table, the radio plays country western music in the background, interrupted from time to time with weather reports and regional news. From the kitchen, you can look out at the harbor and landscape while talking, drinking coffee and taking long pauses. The kitchen is the central place in the house in these fishing hamlets. Through the kitchen window, with small, light curtains, you “check the weather”: how the waves on the fjord look, the direction of the wind, the way the sea gulls are behaving and so on – information that is vital for the fishermen with small boats.

Looking through the kitchen window, Hans will feel that it is his landscape – both inner and outer – that is of importance. He is proud of their way of living. “We don’t make demands; we are used to fending for ourselves.” Hans Karlsen talks about all the people that have moved, both those who have “moved to the other side” (died) and the ones that have moved out of the village. “The people that used to live here, they have passed away over time, and you know where the final resting place is... And you know, when the youth don’t stay, the villages die.” We notice Amundsen’s deep understanding of the worldview of the two brothers, and how a conversation is meant to play out: a mix of serious talk and humorous understatements. Hans offers a little glass of vodka (or maybe it’s moonshine – it’s called “coffee doctor” in the rural parts of Northern Norway), emphasizing that he only offers this to special guests. You can hear the liquor being poured into the coffee, and the sound of cups hitting the saucer, giving you as the listener a feeling of sitting at the table with them. Hans tells Amundsen that he can “see,” that he is a bit clairvoyant. “It was years ago I was aware of it. I don’t tell it to everyone. It happens when you live in a place like this.” In the next sentence, Hans jokes about how he serves coffee doctors to real doctors that visit Nordmanvik as tourists, and they have a good laugh about it.

Hans asks Amundsen if he believes in God. Amundsen does not answer, but returns the question. Hans answers “I don’t know. I can’t say frankly that there is God, but there is something... Maybe there is someone who has created all this. But it is man who has written the Bible, and it is man who is so clever and has created all these weapons.”

The conversation turns to death and the dangers of fishing from small vessels in these waters. Many fishermen lose their lives each year in Northern Norway. It is especially dangerous to fish from small boats. A weather phenomenon called *polare lavtrykk* (polar low pressure) hits these coasts

regularly with great force. They build up in very short time, and is difficult both for experienced fishermen to predict and for the meteorologists to forecast. Hans believes that the time of each person's death is already decided, a view common in *Læstadianismen*, a pietistic religious movement influenced by traditional shamanistic Sámi religion. "It is not written down when you are supposed to die, but the time is decided. You don't go before your time has come." God – or what he calls "something" – decides when you are supposed "to go," but your own skills keep you alive until the hour comes.

Hans connects his thoughts about life and death to his seamanship. "For many years, I have been fishing alone from my boat. Other fishermen ask me why I fish alone, but I can't wait years for a companion. When you don't have someone else on board, you must be observant." Hans gives Amundsen his *précis* on how to manage alone in a small boat when storm comes: "It's up to you. You don't need to be strong, but you must be observant. It's the sea that teaches you; you must obey the sea, not steer randomly. It is a small boat, and the waves are huge. Not long ago I was fishing, and an unexpected storm came from northeast. I was not afraid. I knew I was going to manage, even though the waves were 4–5 meters high, huge waves for a small boat. You must know when to back up – to stop, to look – look at the sea, go carefully. We learned this as boys. We had to be observant. You don't learn this at school, not even at the nautical college. They only teach you how to navigate by instruments. And that's fine, but they don't know this... You know, these small boats don't have instruments. I don't need radar. I am used to managing without."

Hans talks with great authority on how to steer his small boat in heavy storms. He is proud of his seamanship. He remarks again that you don't learn this in school. "I have only a few weeks of schooling. The war came and I got some weeks at school when I was ten years old. Those who do not attend school, get more in return – they get to know much more." His best teacher is the sea itself: "It's the sea that teaches you." In lieu of formal schooling, Hans has been educated through thousands of hours at sea, in all weather, in his small boat.

In a passage towards the end of the documentary, the brothers are discussing the weather and how to move the boat out of the mooring because of ice that is forming in the harbor, when they suddenly change from their rather broken Norwegian to Sámi. They talk unstrained in Sámi and they seem to forget the journalist and his microphone. Their use of the old Sea-Sámi language, hardly spoken by any people these days, reminds us that Eilert and Hans in Nordmanvik are some of the last people left of an old and vanishing culture. A "people without a past" as they often are called, with reference to the nearly total neglect in Norway for this part of the Sámi population.

After listening four or five times to the documentary, my old cassette player nearly breaks down. The voices of Hans and Eilert are distorted and slow, hardly recognizable. At NRK's homepage, I read in an article (dated 2001) that Hans died in 1998, 63 years old, and that Eilert now lives, or then lived, in a municipal center in the winter, but come spring moves back to Nordmanvik, where he spends the summer.

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