BROOKE GLADSTONE:
You just heard Brooke allude to a story we ran a couple of years ago about how, and how much, we edit what you hear on our show. It was the brainchild of one of our reporters, John Solomon, who suggested that there were aspects of the process here at On the Media that might interest our listeners.

In fact, he thought that some of these methods, used throughout public radio, would come as much of a surprise to them as they did to him.

In the spirit of ever-increasing transparency and our growing awareness that we are losing control of our material, whether we like it or not, we offer this replay. A warning: those who prefer not to peek behind the curtain should turn down the volume for about the next ten minutes.

JOHN SOLOMON:
Before I started working at On the Media, I was an avid NPR news listener. To me, like many devotees, an important aspect of the network’s appeal is how smooth, well-crafted and polished it sounds.

That soothing and reliable sound has made the NPR product distinctive from other radio and news media.

[MUSIC: ALL THINGS CONSIDERED THEME]

MELISSA BLOCK:
This is All Things Considered from NPR News. I’m Melissa Block.

MICHELE NORRIS:
And I’m Michele Norris. Next, the rule of law in Russia.

MELISSA BLOCK:
Tips for senators on how to survive –

JOHN SOLOMON:
Now that I am on the other side of the speaker, it has been fascinating to discover the importance of behind-the-scenes technical packaging in bringing about that effect.

Of course, I want to make it clear that I have found the NPR News on-air staff, present company...
excluded, is indeed smooth and eloquent, and normally ask the right question. But they, and now me, aren't as perfect as it once seemed. New York Times media reporter, David Carr.

DAVID CARR:
Everybody always sounds erudite and witty on NPR and I've always wondered why, and I think there probably is some darkroom magic going on there.

JOHN SOLOMON:
My exposure to the darkroom began when I edited my first story. I sat at the digital editing console with a producer, listening to an interview with a source I had recorded earlier.

With just strokes of the keyboard, he cleaned up and tightened the sound bites I was going to use, taking out sentences, words and even some of the pauses, making what are called internal edits. Then the various thoughts were woven together technically in a way that would be totally hidden to the listener.

In fact, the public is far less aware of editing on radio than on television or in print. For example, to eliminate words, a TV producer has to use more visible means, such as a cutaway shot or jump cut. Newspaper reporters, by form, must put a break between nonconsecutive quotations, among other constraints.

David Carr says that at the Times:

DAVID CARR:
People have to speak in complete sentences or you don't use it.

JOHN SOLOMON:
NPR interview subjects almost never complain about the slicing and dicing, in large part because the edits make them sound more articulate without changing the meaning. In fact, what David Carr actually said on tape was:

DAVID CARR:
People have to speak in complete sentences or you – you – you – you don't – you don't - use it.

JOHN SOLOMON:
While many public radio programs, particularly call-in shows, are live, I was surprised to find out that newsmaker interviews for the daily NPR national news shows, Morning Edition and All Things Considered, are often not. Usually they are pre-taped and quickly edited down.

Likewise, I was stunned when I learned that the main Fresh Air interview is actually condensed from a longer Q&A, and at times, the Car Talk guys will edit in some extra laughs kept on file.

[CACKLING LAUGHTER]

TOM OR RAY TAPPET:
They will do that, I hear. [LAUGHS]

JOHN SOLOMON:
Here at On the Media we do even more editing, because as a weekly show, we have more time. It helps make us sound far more articulate than we actually are. For example, here's Bob's original question in a recent interview taping with National Journal's Bill Powers.

BOB GARFIELD:
Now your column this week says that there's a [LAUGHS] actually a disadvantage to being a front-runner because immediately the media want to take you down. That is a very serious charge really, against the media. How true is it? Are, are those – are the motives really so – let's see are the motives really so sinister – not quite the right word – are they really so [PAUSE] uh, um – [CHUCKLES]

BILL POWERS:
Let's say, are they really so vicious?

BOB GARFIELD:
Mindlessly blood – blood thirst – I mean, what you’re describing is a kind of blood lust. Are the media really bloodthirsty? Isn’t there – isn’t there something a little bit more responsible going on?

JOHN SOLOMON:
Here’s how it sounded after the editing:

BOB GARFIELD:
Now your column this week says there’s a - [LAUGHS] actually a disadvantage to being a frontrunner because immediately the media want to take you down. I mean, what you’re describing is a kind of blood lust. Are the media really bloodthirsty? Isn’t there something a little bit more responsible going on?

JOHN SOLOMON:
Further underscoring the invisibility of radio techniques was the answer to a question I asked when I first started at On the Media, “Where’s Bob?”

It turns out that OTM’s co-host does most of his interviewing and hosting from his home in Virginia, while the rest of us are in the New York City headquarters. That distance could be why I picked one of his mistakes to highlight the editing process.

Nothing is so identified with NPR News as its signature field pieces, and nothing is more of a cut and paste production collage. My first such story was a media workout day held for reporters by the National Football League’s New York Jets at their practice facility.

[CLIP: AMBIENT SOUND, NEW YORK JETS PRACTICE]

JOHN SOLOMON:
Before I left, the producer suggested I record ambient sound during the drills that could be mixed later into the piece underneath my narration.

[CLIP]:
COACH:
Where’s the ball?
MAN:
The coach – oh, sorry.
[PRACTICE HUBBUB, UP AND UNDER]

JOHN SOLOMON:
That confused me. As a listener, I had thought that the narration in field pieces was recorded by the reporter at the location.

[JETS PRACTICE HUBBUB]
I guess I should have realized reporters wouldn’t always be able to deliver their clear, concise, well-organized prose, while also reporting the story.

Okay, now that the curtain has been pulled back a bit, the natural question is, so what. Is there any problem that this behind-the-scenes manufacturing process is largely unknown - maybe until now - to the average NPR listener?

ALEX CHADWICK:
I think there’s no question that most people listening to NPR programs are unaware of the artifice that’s there.

JOHN SOLOMON:
NPR veteran field reporter Alex Chadwick is now the host of the program Day to Day.

ALEX CHADWICK:
Well, why do they try to make it sound that way, if it’s not that way? It’s not real.
Well, because the world of presentation and the media really isn’t real, in that sense. It is real, but it’s a kind of a heightened reality. It’s a better reality. It’s a, a cleaner and more articulate reality.

JOHN SOLOMON:
By making everyone sound better and increasing the amount of content in the broadcasts, it would seem to be a win-win-win for the network, its sources and, most importantly, its listeners.

Yet is there a small sin of omission? NPR may not be actively misleading listeners, but we all know that they don’t know how we create the cleaner and more articulate reality. That post-production perfection may be why some sources at the end of a taped interview are apologetic about their perceived lack of perfection, like OTM guest Harper’s editor Lewis Lapham.

BROOKE GLADSTONE:
Lewis, thank you very much.

LEWIS LAPHAM:
I – I’m sorry, Brooke, to get it all mixed up, but I mean you – you’ll be able to cut something out of it, right?

BROOKE GLADSTONE:
I’m sure we will.

LEWIS LAPHAM:
[LAUGHS] Okay.

JOHN SOLOMON:
Ironically, television is usually seen as the news medium with artifice, while radio is viewed as more authentic.

NPR’s ombudsman Jeffrey Dvorkin believes trust in television news has declined, in part, because viewers see it as overproduced entertainment. Is it possible that the fact listeners are unaware of how much production is involved has helped retain their trust in NPR News?

NPR’s executive producer for training, Jonathan Kern, is overseeing a year-long project on news standards, which will likely result in the network providing listeners with more information on production techniques. But he doesn’t see much utility for the public in adding transparency, for transparency’s sake.

JONATHAN KERN:
Do they really want to know how we edited every actuality and whether there were internal edits? I would say no, they probably don’t want to or need to know that. Would it be a good idea occasionally to explain how it’s done? Absolutely.

JOHN SOLOMON:
It also may be worth examining whether there are normal production elements that may unnecessarily deceive listeners. For example, this is how All Things Considered’s Melissa Block introduced a report on President Bush’s visit to Singapore.

MELISSA BLOCK:
NPR’s Vicky O’Hara is traveling with the President and joins us now from Singapore. Vicky, the centerpiece of this trip to Asia for the President was the annual –

JOHN SOLOMON:
Kern and Dvorkin agree that the use of “joins us” in an introduction strongly implies that the interview is live when, in fact, it may have been taped hours before.

JONATHAN KERN:
I think it’s a morally slippery slope. I think it makes more sense to say “We spoke to Vicky O’Hara a few hours ago,” boom, and you take that. The idea of being live is a construct and almost a vanity of the electronic media now.

JOHN SOLOMON:
But again, has any real harm been done? Neither Kern, the former executive producer of All Things Considered, nor the producers here at OTM remember getting even one complaint from a source about how an interview was cut, which is remarkable, considering how much editing is done.

In fact, the most important reason to be more open about the production process may be as a vaccination in the event of such a complaint in the future. It might help avoid the massive self-flagellating that The New York Times has recently gone through.

DAVID CARR:
As soon as there’s a scandal that pops up where somebody’s quote got cleaned up and ended up saying exactly the opposite thing of what they intended to say then, of course, we’ll all be on some big fatwa about audio rigor and what.

But in the meantime, amongst the list of sort of journalistic mis- and mal-feasance, I think it’s below misdemeanor and just above jaywalking. And you make sure and clean up my quotes, so as they sound good, won’t you?

JOHN SOLOMON:
They do it for me, David, so I’ll do it for you. For On the Media, this – whoops, for John Sol – [LAUGHS] okay, one more time. For On the Media, this is John Solomon.

[MUSIC UP AND UNDER]

BOB GARFIELD:
That’s it for this week’s show. On the Media is produced by Megan Ryan, Tony Field, Jamie York, Mike Vuolo, Mark Phillips and Nazanin Rafsanjani, and edited – by Brooke.

Dylan Keefe is our technical director and Jennifer Munson our engineer. Our webmaster is Amy Pearl. And we bid a fond farewell to our intern, Christopher Worth.

BROOKE GLADSTONE:
Katya Rogers is our senior producer and John Keefe our executive producer. Bassist/composer Ben Allison wrote our theme. You can listen to the program and find free transcripts, MP3 downloads and our podcast at onthemedia.org, and email us at onthemedia@wnyc.org. This is On the Media from WNYC. I’m Brooke Gladstone.

BOB GARFIELD:
And I’m Bob Garfield.