



Recognizing The Risk Takers

Eleven Podcasters Making Bold Bets

Final Entry
Deadline:
June 26, 2026

Table of Contents

- | | |
|---|---|
| 03 Introduction: The New Rulebook | 10 RISK 7: Boarding a True Crime Cruise |
| 04 RISK 1: Investing in Culture Commentary | 11 RISK 8: Doubling Down on Narrative |
| 05 RISK 2: Creating an Agentic Production Partner | 12 RISK 9: Scripting Your Clips |
| 06 RISK 3: Creating an Alter Ego to Drive Views | 13 RISK 10: Going Indie |
| 07 RISK 4: Translating Journalism to Video | 14 RISK 11: Growing Without Video |
| 08 RISK 5: Abandoning the Edit | 15 About The Signal Awards |
| 09 RISK 6: Becoming the Host | |

Letter from The Signal Awards

The New Rulebook



Hello friends,

At The Signal Awards, we don't just track where podcasting has been, we listen for where it's going next. Right now, what we hear is the sound of something being built in real time:

In 2026, podcasting is in its risk-taking era. The rulebook that once governed what a podcast could be (its format, its business model, its relationship to platform and audience) has been dismantled. In its place: a culture of experimentation that is producing some of the most exciting, strange, and resonant work this medium has ever seen.

The creators defining this moment aren't waiting for permission or perfection. They're treating their shows like living prototypes. Scrapping what isn't working, doubling down on what resonates, and trusting their instincts more than any playbook.

For this year's trend report, The Signal Awards set out to find the risk takers: the podcasters, producers, and industry builders who are leaning into uncertainty and coming out the other side with something worth listening to. We talked to dozens of insiders about the creative leaps, business pivots, and bold bets shaping the podcast landscape right now. What we found was not chaos, it was craft.

The willingness to experiment, it turns out, is its own form of excellence.



Jemma Rose Brown
General Manager, The Signal Awards

Investing in Culture Commentary

The Risk Taker



Ellice Ellis

Director of Podcasts and Digital Content, *Therapy for Black Girls*



The Risk

We introduced a recurring, rapid-response pop culture segment within *Therapy for Black Girls* and, after seeing strong audience engagement, expanded it into a standalone weekly mini-podcast.

Each week, our production assistant Bria—who has deep experience contextualizing pop culture across social and podcast platforms—works with our team to track pop culture stories. We then identify what resonates most with our audience and frame those moments as questions for our host, Dr. Joy Harden Bradford, to unpack through a clinical mental health lens.

The risk is twofold: first, it introduces a faster, more iterative production cadence into a show that has traditionally prioritized evergreen, expert-led conversations.

Second, it positions us more directly within the broader ecosystem of shows shaping conversations around Black culture and entertainment, while maintaining a distinct commitment to clinical expertise.

The Reward

Depth and reach. We're giving our existing audience something more dynamic and current, while also attracting new listeners who may come in through culture-first conversations and stay for the mental health framing. This approach also allows us to position *Therapy for Black Girls* as a bridge between cultural commentary and clinical insight.

The hope is to see better engagement on platforms like YouTube Shorts and TikTok when we create ancillary content from this segment.



It introduces a faster, more iterative production cadence into a show that has traditionally prioritized evergreen, expert-led conversations.



Creating an Agentic Production Partner

The Risk Taker



Leital Molad

Head of Podcasts,
WaitWhat



The Risk

In February, our entire company paused operations and we held an AI hackathon. Instead of publishing new episodes, we ran re-runs for three days. Jeff Berman, our CEO, was the one who spearheaded this idea of doubling-down on AI, and our COO Taryn Fixel and cofounder Jai Punjabi orchestrated the company-wide sprint. We all got Claude Pro accounts and did different experiments.

Critically, using Claude Cowork, we've created a tool that uses our past episodes of Masters of Scale as a dataset, and it is now a producing partner for Tricia Bobeda (the show's Senior Supervising Producer). The tool creates a research document about each guest based on an evolving understanding of the show and its host. Tricia then refines and fact

checks the document, and uses it to shape the roadmap for the interview — so there is always a human in the loop. While experimenting, we're learning the agent's limitations, but if you tell it what it missed, it gets better.

The Reward

Saving producer time on research and prep, allowing more time for creative thinking. We documented the whole AI sprint in this episode of our show Pioneers of AI.

65% of our survey respondents cited adding AI tools to their workflow within the last year



“The tool creates a research document about each guest based on an evolving understanding of the show and its host.”

Creating an Alter Ego to Drive Views

The Risk Taker



Brooke Slater

Host, *Psychopedia*



The Risk

When my longtime co-host left the podcast, I knew I would have to do something to disrupt the game because I was losing his entire following. So I let my freak flag fly and my alter ego out to play. I put on a hoodie and just went for it. I stepped into this corpse cleaner character, hit record, and posted on my “Investigator Slater” handle. I woke up the next morning... and the video I’d recorded had over 1 million views. I was getting 5-10k new followers every day. So I kept going with this character.

My persona on the podcast is buttoned up and research driven, whereas my character on social media is the opposite of that. So I get to embrace both parts

of my personality. The two minutes I’m recording my reel are the best two minutes of my day. She’s unfiltered, unapologetic. She’s nuts!

The Reward

In 9 months I went from 9k followers to over 600k followers. The opportunities that have come run laps around what was going on before. I’ve developed *Girl on Gore*, a longform series based on this character. I have a book proposal out for *Girl on Gore* and had a small role in a movie.

“

I let my freak flag fly and my alter ego out to play.



Translating Journalism to Video

The Risk Taker



Jonathan Menjivar

Executive Producer,
Stateside with Kai and Carter
(from *The Guardian*)



The Risk

We took on translating a news podcast into video. Most of the big video podcasts out there are opinion and chat shows, so it's a risk for a journalistic organization like *The Guardian* to lean into something more talky and loosey goosey. Our team took all the tools of journalism podcasting, borrowed a little bit from live radio, a little from other video podcasters who we think have figured out this new-ish format, and ran hard at making a show that would excite us. We know how important it is for people to feel a personal connection with the shows they consume, so we built a show around the faces and voices of our hosts Kai Wright and Carter Sherman. We wanted *Stateside with Kai and Carter* to skirt the line between what came before and what people are hungry for now.

The Reward

It works! We get to inform the world and entertain them too, using *The Guardian's* global, independent perspective. And the craft didn't have to be sacrificed. Narrative structure, careful pacing, waiting to unfurl certain details — all of it carries over to video. The format changed but the standards didn't. We can still be thoughtful, cautious, and wildly creative even if you can see our hosts now.

67% of our survey respondents cited they have started publishing a video version of their podcast



“We wanted *Stateside with Kai and Carter* to be a show that skirts the line between what came before and what people are hungry for now.”

Abandoning the Edit

The Risk Taker



Harry Morton

CEO, Lower Street



The Risk

Most of what we produce is carefully crafted. The edit process is where a lot of the creative craft comes in. It's also kind of a safety net - you can fix and reshape things, and turn even dodgy recordings into something worth listening to.

But with live streaming, you lose all of that... What happens on the day is what airs.

And that's what we're doing. We're building a Lower Street live show with and for CMOs, because I think live is a really exciting format that has not been explored enough in B2B content.

We've no idea if this will work. We're betting on the fact that as a response to AI, audiences are craving more connection, more real, human content and experiences. And what can be more real and human than live-streaming where you can't "fix it in post"?

The Reward

There are a lot of shows in the marketing industry. We hope the live format helps us to stand out, build community in a meaningful way, and learn about execution in a new format. The feedback loop is quick with live so we'll know soon whether it's working (or not!) and be able to iterate fast.

“
But with live streaming, you lose all of that... what happens on the day is what airs.”

LOWER STREET

Becoming the Host

The Risk Taker



Paola Mardo

SVP Head of Audio,
Proximity Media
Host/Director/Producer,
IN PROXIMITY



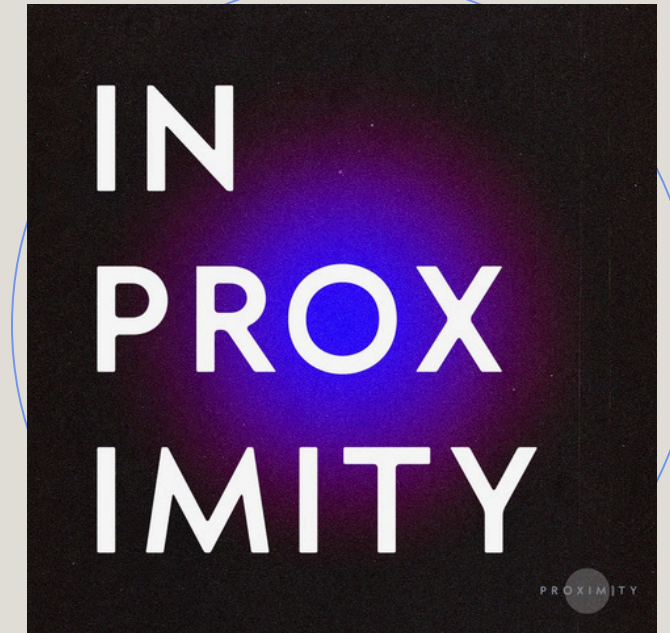
The Risk

I spent years mastering the tools of audio journalism. Stepping in front of a camera when we transitioned our podcast *IN PROXIMITY* into video meant unlearning some of it. In audio, you suppress your “mm hmms” and try not to interject. On video, that same restraint can read like absence. Finding the middle ground where I’m present without being performative, meant getting comfortable with just being myself. There was a moment in my career where I thought I needed to be Terry Gross (the gold standard) but my preteen dream was to be on MTV, so I’m bringing that energy now.

Learning to host on camera has meant letting more of myself back in: the curiosity, the quirkiness, the person who you’d actually meet in IRL conversation.

The Reward

Personally, I’m having more fun! The show is growing and our audience has given great feedback on our transition to video. Building a space for our community to hang with and learn from the artists and filmmakers we work with at Proximity was always part of the goal. I’m honored to help make it happen.



“Finding the middle ground where I’m present without being performative, meant getting comfortable with just being myself.”

Boarding a True Crime Cruise

The Risk Taker



Andrea Gunning
Host, *Betrayal*



Mo Laborde
Managing Editor,
Glass Podcasts



The Risk

When iHeartMedia and Virgin Voyages invited us to stage our first-ever live show aboard Virgin's True Crime Cruise, we knew we were taking a real risk. We produce *Betrayal*, a survivor-centered narrative series. A cruise is designed for escape, celebration, and indulgence. Our show is about the aftermath of abuse, manipulation, and the long road to healing. Those worlds could not have felt further apart.

We decided to lean in rather than soften the material. We invited two families to join us onboard, the storytellers and survivors behind Seasons 3 and 4. In the weeks leading up to the trip, our production team built a 90-minute live event centered on truth, not spectacle.

The Reward

Despite the daunting task of producing our first live show on a boat, our preparation and relationship-building paid off. The experience far exceeded our expectations. The audience was curious, empathetic, and present in a way that felt meaningful for everyone involved.

In the Q&A, audience members teared up with gratitude and even shared their own experiences with trauma, like childhood sexual abuse. The opportunity proved that even in spaces designed for escape, there's still a real appetite for honesty and depth if it's handled with care.

“A cruise is designed for escape, celebration, and indulgence. Our show is about the aftermath of abuse, manipulation, and the long road to healing. Those worlds could not have felt further apart.”



Doubling Down on Narrative

The Risk Taker



Arif Noorani

Director, [CBC Podcasts](#)



The Risk

The risk we are taking is doubling down on production-intensive, narrative documentary series, at a moment when the industry trend is pivoting toward lower-cost, personality-driven talk. We're commissioning for our key umbrella strands: *Uncover*, *Personally*, *Split Screen* and *Understood*. For example, *Personally* channels the heyday of the podcasting renaissance with artist- and storyteller-led content that pushes the boundaries of the audio format. Our most recent *Discount Dave (and the Fix)* adapts a one-woman play and reimagines it as a podcast (recently selected by Tribeca!).

The Reward

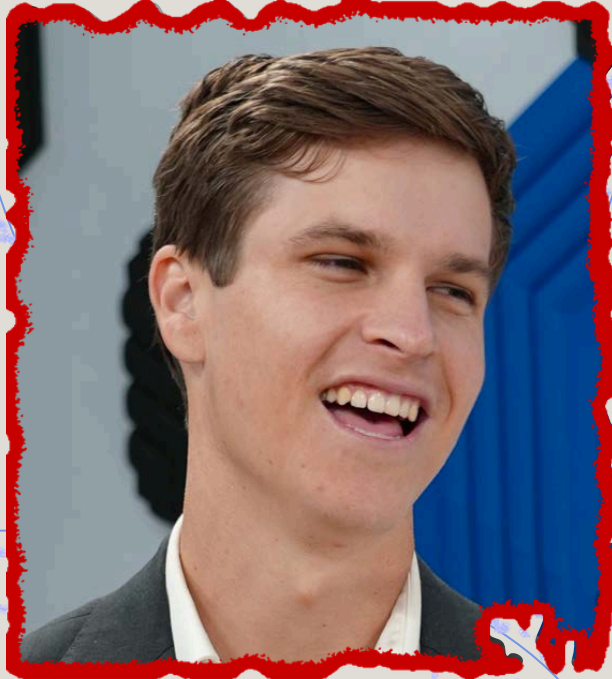
We're gambling that the **audience appetite** is larger than what the market is commissioning. And we think we'll be proven right. We have ambitious goals to continue building the audience loyalty for these feeds and think it's a goldmine of IP. Our primary goal is to expose more and more audiences to these stories.



“We're gambling that the **audience appetite** is larger than what the market is commissioning. And we think we'll be proven right.”

Scripting Your Clips

The Risk Taker



Toby Howell

Co-Host, Morning Brew Daily



The Risk

I have a dirty little secret, which is that the clips we post to our social media are not from the show itself. They are re-recorded after we tape, and specifically geared for a social audience. We make it look as if we are recording the podcast, but we've scripted it out. My co-host Neal will literally hold his computer up like a teleprompter so it looks like I'm looking at him when we film.

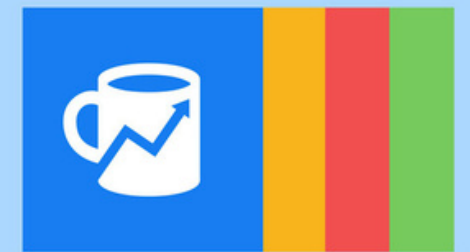
I don't think of social media as a place where you should copy and paste what you can get from a longform episode. It should stand alone. Our account should

be an account that you would want to follow even if you never heard about the podcast. It sounds counterintuitive because we want to convert to the podcast, but we believe that if you make something good in and of itself, good things are downstream of that. A podcast is a different medium than social media, so don't try to fit a square peg into a round hole.

The Reward

Clips grow the pie! They're part of the total audience universe of the show. That is objectively a good thing.

“I don't think of social media as a place where you should copy and paste what you can get from a longform episode. It should stand alone.”



**MORNING
BREW
DAILY**

Going Indie

The Risk Taker



Nayeema Raza

Creator and Host,
Smart Girl Dumb Questions



The Risk

A year ago, I launched an independent podcast. I was told it would fail. Friends pointed out: the market was saturated and I was not a celebrity (rude, but true). I had no network or investors. But I had a belief that craft matters, a decade of producing experience across docs and pods, and an original voice that led with curiosity and a willingness to ask the questions we all have in a world where we ask most quietly to our phones. Plus, I was prepared to hustle.

I booked early guests like Mark Cuban, Neil deGrasse Tyson, and two 11 year olds who (like me) were not celebrities. I successfully pitched a few early brand partners. And with that, I bootstrapped my first 20 episodes.

The Reward

Smart Girl Dumb Questions was a Spotify Wrapped Top 10 Best New Show of 2025 and won the 2026 iHeart Podcast Award for Best Emerging Podcast. 50 episodes in, we've amassed 3M+ downloads/views, 30M+ reel views, and an engaged community of fans who write in, comment and share. And it's hit the zeitgeist: SGDQ's newsmaking interviews have featured in CNN, People, The New Yorker, the Post, and even earned a reference in Zohran Mamdani's inaugural address.

The greatest reward? Liberating my own voice and introducing a tone that's accessible, irreverent, and curious enough to ask anything... even a dumb question.

SMART GIRL DUMB QUESTIONS

WITH NAYEEMA RAZA



“
The greatest reward?
Liberating my own voice.”

Growing Without Video

The Risk Taker



Nichole Hill

Host and Creator,
Our Ancestors Were Messy



The Risk

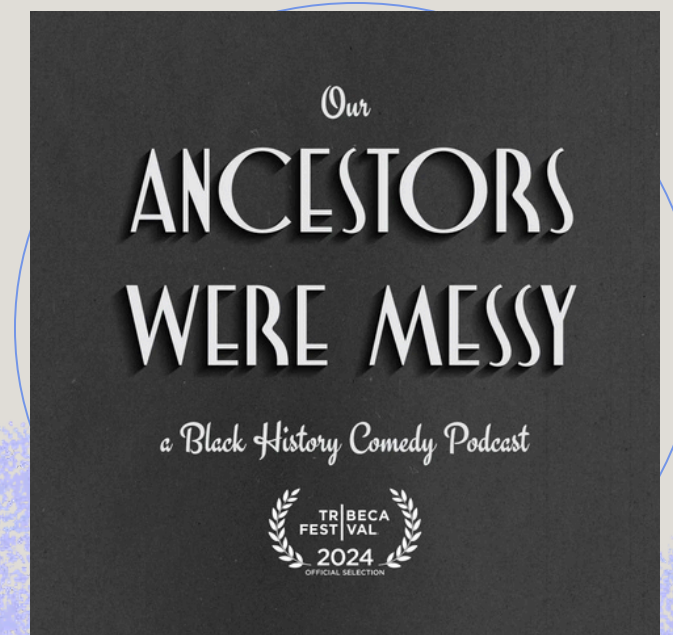
My risk was choosing a blended format for my show. It's completely scripted but tracked live and in a conversational style with a guest interjecting with their reactions and questions. The 2+ hour interviews are edited down to 50-60 minutes and then sound designed. I make the show independently so I research, script, perform, and edit each episode. Then I listen again and again as episodes go through multiple rounds of sound design. Then I do the final QC listen. I honestly just wanted to make something that I could stand to listen to that many times and still feel excited about! This format does that for me. I hoped it would be the case for others.

The Reward

The risk paid off; I survived the edits and actually enjoyed them, if you can believe it! Audiences have connected with the style; I think in part because so many of the people consuming podcasts are listening/watching chat-casts and interview shows. My show's tone makes it feel as though it's one of those shows while still being a scripted narrative. This seems to have lowered the barrier to entry for audiences that say they "don't do podcasts."

“

This seems to have lowered the barrier to entry for audiences that say they “don't do podcasts.”



About The Signal Awards

The Signal Awards recognizes the podcasts that define culture. We are mission-focused on uplifting the podcast medium by honoring the most potent, meaningful and unprecedented audio projects being made today.

Signal accepts entries as Shows, Limited Series & Specials, Individual Episodes and Brand Storytelling across a broad spectrum of genre and craft categories. To learn more about how to honor your podcast, contact our [Awards Specialist](#).

Final Entry Deadline: June 26, 2026
Enter at signalaward.com



Created by

Jemma Rose Brown, General Manager
Anika Bjarndottir, Social Media Manager
Emma Larson, Managing Director, Production
Miral Sattar, Audience Strategy and Growth Lead
Sarah Storm, Interim Program Coordinator
Vanessa Azen, Digital Project Manager
Amy Chen, Senior Designer

Contributors

Ellice Ellis, *Therapy for Black Girls*
Leital Molad, *Wait What*
Brooke Slater, *Psychopedia*
Jonathan Menjivar, *The Guardian*
Harry Morton, *Lower Street*
Paola Mardo, *Proximity Media*
Andrea Gunning & Mo Laborde, *Glass Podcasts*
Arif Noorani, *The CBC*
Toby Howell & Jen Walsh, *Morning Brew*
Nayeema Raza, *Smart Girl Dumb Questions*
Nichole Hill, *Our Ancestors Were Messy*