

BOB GARFIELD:

Al Jazeera is news seen through a different cultural and historical lens than American news, and that's good. Variety is a vital part of a healthy media diet.

Sixteen-year-old Brandan Illis has been gorging on news since at least the age of six, when the Twin Towers fell. When WNYC's *Radio Rookies*, a program that teaches kids had to tell their own stories, put out a call for personal tales of 9/11, Brendan answered because 9/11 and news has played a big role in the direction of his life.

BRENDAN ILLIS [NARRATION]:

I'm driving with my mom from our home in suburban New Jersey. Like most of my friends, I just got my permit but in a lot of ways I'm different.

BRENDAN'S MOM:

When you were in pre-K, the one thing that you wanted to do when you were a grown up was watch the news.

BRENDAN ILLIS: [NARRATION]

As soon as I was old enough, I started reading the newspaper.

BRENDAN'S MOM:

And you didn't start with the comics like most kids do.

[CLIP]:

RADIO ANNOUNCER:

Warning: *The Michael Savage Show* contains adult language.

[END CLIP]

BRENDAN ILLIS [NARRATION]:

I also listened to a lot of conservative talk radio, and my parents begrudgingly allowed it.

MICHAEL SAVAGE:

The radical Muslim world has declared war on America. We are at war!

[RADIO SOUNDTRACK IN BACKGROUND]

BRENDAN ILLIS [NARRATION]:

9/11 was my introduction to politics, world diplomacy, war, the economy - it affected everything. I may have been the youngest neo-con ever,

MICHAEL SAVAGE:

This is your Pearl Harbor!

9/11 COMMISSION MEMBER:

Members of the Commission. Your staff has developed initial findings to present to the public on the nature of the enemy...

BRENDAN ILLIS [NARRATION]:

In 4th grade I even recorded the 9/11

Commission hearings on the cassette tapes, so I could hear them when I got home from school.

9/11 COMMISSION MEMBER:

We will focus on Al Qaeda's history and evolution.

BRENDAN ILLIS:

At school I'm known as the walking history book. I take it as a compliment.

TEACHER:

Why is this important? Brendan?

BRENDAN ILLIS:

He was the spiritual leader of Al-Qaeda.

TEACHER:

Right.

BRENDAN ILLIS [NARRATION]:

Most kids my age don't really think about how 9/11 changed our country, I wish they did. The effort they put into gossiping and sneaking out, I put into researching politics and current events.

[MUSIC UP AND UNDER]

Last year I started a blog. It's like a direct line into my head. I posted this question to my followers: Do you think 9/11 affected our generation?

ANNA:

Like we just - we don't care as much as we should.

BRENDAN ILLIS [NARRATION]:

This girl I've never actually met in person responded.

ANNA:

My name's Anna and I'm from Phoenix, Arizona.

BRENDAN ILLIS:

Can you tell me quick, like how you met me?

ANNA:

Over a blogging site called tumblr.

BRENDAN ILLIS:

Anna told me about one time when tumblr crashed, which it does a lot.

ANNA:

When it came back up people were posting pictures of the Twin Towers saying, oh tumblr crashed, and they were saying like, it's the same thing, which – nowhere near it.

BRENDAN ILLIS:

That's awful.

BRENDAN ILLIS [NARRATION]:

They were comparing the deaths of almost 3,000 people to a website crashing for a couple of days.

Maybe I take the World Trade Center attacks more seriously because we talk about that kind of stuff in my family.

BRENDAN'S MOM:

Please don't eat with your fingers...

BRENDAN ILLIS [NARRATION]:

Like one night at dinner:

BRENDAN'S MOM:

There's a difference between hearing that a thousand people died and actually seeing images of people jumping to their deaths because have no hope of survival.

BRENDAN ILLIS [NARRATION]:

My parents always give us answers, even to difficult questions. My ten-year-old sister Kathryn just learned about 9/11 from a documentary she saw on TV.

KATHRYN ILLIS:

Would you rather die by jumping out a window or from the fire?

MOM:

I don't know - I honestly hope I'm never put in that position – to know that the people in that building, many of them were in that position, is just - heartbreaking.

BRENDAN ILLIS [NARRATION]:

I'm in the youngest group of people who remember 9/11. As a 16 year old who gets it, I fear that people younger than me won't understand and that it'll lose its importance. If we let our guard down it could happen again.

[SISTER KATHRYN LAUGHING]

BRENDAN ILLIS:

Just say "hello"

KATHRYN ILLIS:

Hi.

BRENDAN ILLIS [NARRATION]:

I'm with my little sister Kathryn in the back seat of the car.

BRENDAN ILLIS:

Can you tell me how old you were when 9/11 happened?

KATHRYN ILLIS:

Uh - I wasn't even one. I was zero.

BRENDAN ILLIS:

Do you think it had a pretty big effect on you?

KATHRYN ILLIS:

Not - really.

BRENDAN ILLIS [NARRATION]:

The world didn't change for Kathryn on September 11th, she's never known anything else.

KATHRYN ILLIS:

Well it was big to other people – it was big, but not to my life.

BRENDAN ILLIS [NARRATION]:

My other sister Sarah thinks we talk about it too much.

BRENDAN ILLIS:

So you have no Specific memories of that day?

SARAH ILLIS:

No! You – do you think I haven't thought about this before? [LAUGHS] I've tried to remember.

[OVERTALK]

BRENDAN ILLIS:

So you don't, you don't – you don't-

[OVERTALK]

SARAH ILLIS:

I don't even remember having you as a brother when I was three! [LAUGHS]

[LAUGHTER]

BRENDAN ILLIS [NARRATION]:

She's starting high school this year.

SARAH ILLIS:

It's like it's the past. But it shouldn't be like the main event, like the focus of the country.

BRENDAN ILLIS [NARRATION]:

Like a lot of people in my generation, she thinks of 9/11 as a singular event. But I can't look at it that way.

9/11 was the first news story I ever really followed. I would hear Michael Savage mention a person or an agency on a show and I would be like – well, I don't know what that is. So I'd look it up. And I would go from one Internet search to the next.

Then Savage changed his broadcast time, so I started trawling the Internet for a substitute show and found a whole new world of information.

[MUSIC UP AND UNDER]

So now it wasn't a singular event for me. It's a road, one I'm still walking down today. For WNYC I'm Radio Rookie, Brendan Illis.

BOB GARFIELD:

Brendan Illis' story comes to us courtesy of WNYC's *Radio Rookies*.