

Constructing a Children's Radio Program **by PJ Swift**

If you're like me, some of your most creative ideas come just before sleep, like the idea of creating a radio program for families in your area. Actually, it's not such a bad idea.

All it takes is time, dedication, and a certain amount of craziness. Most programs begin at a local station, where producers are taught the nuts and bolts of local radio: how to design a program, how to use microphones, how to edit, and how to use the broadcasting equipment. Over the years, we've found that public stations, especially "community oriented" stations—the ones held together with used cardboard and packing tape, and staffed by volunteers—are the most receptive to "alternative" audiences such as children and families. There are some exceptions, but in general, if you want to get trained in radio, you'll need to go to a public station. So get thee to a station, stay, and learn.

Nowadays, an alternative place to learn is right at your own computer. Most contemporary computers have sound cards built in: you might have already experimented with burning CDs or sending voice messages to people. It's not such a jump to moving sound around and creating a program. If you have a home studio, all the better. So start to experiment, and see where that takes you.

After you've learned the nuts and bolts, you're ready to put together a program. The content is limited only by your imagination. A children's program can be music, stories, interviews, games, information, talk, call-ins, radio drama, radio comedy, sound effects—whatever. It can be for younger kids, for older kids, or for families to enjoy together. It is our personal bias that the best children's programs are *with* children and not *at* children, but that is not a hard and fast rule. If you can't locate a genuine child, proceed anyway. One may turn up where you least expect one—perhaps inside you.

When you construct your program, work backwards. What will be its final distribution: on the Internet, on the new satellite systems such as XM or Sirius, on commercial stations, on public stations, local, national, regional, etc? Create a program for one of these outlets, or work smart and create a program for all of them in slightly different forms. Each of these distribution outlets has its own requirements and needs. For instance, you'll find that public stations are generally oriented more toward long form programming (half hour or hour-long shows).

Commercial stations often prefer "modules," that is, flexible, short programming that can be dropped into their regular program mix. Public stations like modules sometimes, too. Internet outlets will accommodate nearly anything you can create, although shorter forms are better (under half an hour). Call your intended distributor or station and find out what they use. Make what they want. It's frustrating to find that you've made a program that fits no one's schedule.

There are two new types of programming on the Internet that you may want to consider. You may want to create a program exclusively for webcasting, that is, broadcasting on the Internet. Most local service providers—the people you have e-mail with—can accommodate sound files broadcast via servers. But check first: some require an additional monthly service payment. There are many Web sites that also “webcast” children’s material free, including the Children’s Music Web. Producers of most webcasting sites like programming that is a half hour or less.

The second new type of programming is “podcasting,” wherein high fidelity programming is downloaded through the computer to consumers worldwide and played on personal audio players such as the iPod. Usually such files take up a lot of space, so, again, you’ll need to plan on finding a server that will hold your sound files and make them available to the public. There are a few services that will allow you to use their servers in exchange for the use of your programming. Any length is OK.

One note about webcasting, especially podcasting: You will need to get releases for the use of material you don't own. This is quite different from broadcasting, where an annual fee is paid by the broadcasters to compensate the artists, as in ASCAP or SOCAN arrangements. But there’s little direct compensation in podcasting. And, once something goes out over the computer, especially in a podcasting form equivalent to what you’d get on a CD, there is nothing stopping someone from copying your material and selling it on the street somewhere.

However, there is a flip side to this problem. That is, if you are a children's artist or storyteller, you may benefit from creating a program exclusively out of your own copyrighted material. This extends the number of outlets that are available to you. If you own the material, then you can broadcast it freely through radio or cable or distribute it through electronic means such as the Internet. The program itself becomes an advertisement for the product that you sell, and thus it can become self-supporting.

But this is not the only reason to broadcast to kids. You may want to create a program just because there's a need. And there definitely *is* a need, now more than ever. There's no money in it, but then, that didn't stop most of today's producers. We're an eccentric bunch, we know, but we're happy.

One final thought: without exception, active producers of children's radio are eager to see more radio programming for kids on the air. They are open to sharing their ideas and experiences. If you're considering creating a program, call a person who has a similar program and compare notes. You're guaranteed to make a friend.

Resources:

Children's Radio List (www.kidsmusicplanet.com)
Monty Harper's up-to-date listing of public, commercial, and Internet broadcasting for children. Free.

Find a station:

Radio Locator (www.radio-locator.com)

Public Radio listings:

Public Radio Fan (find a station near you) (www.publicradiofan.com)
National Public Radio (www.npr.org)
National Federation of Community Broadcasters (www.nfcb.org)

Satellite broadcasters:

XM Kids (www.xmradio.com)
Sirius Satellite Radio (www.sirius.com)

Webcast outlets:

The Children's Music Web (www.childrensmusic.org)
The Kids' Internet Radio Project (www.kirp.org)

Podcasting:

Podcast Net (www.podcast.net)

Webcast- /issues-oriented news about children, with some children's voices:

One World Radio (www.radio.oneworld.net)

International group of children's broadcasters:

World Radio Forum (www.worldradioforum.org)