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Distro Dancing (Part 1)

February 22, 2010

By Barrett Golding

The Internet has made it unnecessary for radio programs ever to hit physical media. Sound files we mix in our computers can now be accessed by stations via a variety of online services. We sent AIR member Barrett Golding on a fact-finding mission to investigate how Content Depot and PRX have affected radio distribution, aka "distro."



Once upon a pre-Net time, we'd mail CDs to stations — put plastic right in their hands. It was laborious and expensive, but effective. Now, not so much: [Arvid Hokanson](#), KUOW assistant program director, says he "tells people not to send CDs. They waste producers' time and money; and we don't listen to them anymore." Send an MP3 link, he advises, or post it on [ContentDepot](#) or [PRX](#).

There are other online ways to get programs to PDs: Pacifica's [AudioPort.org](#), the [Internet Archive](#), or your own Web/FTP site. But PRSS (Public Radio Satellite System) ContentDepot and PRX (Public Radio Exchange) are where most pubradio programs are stored. For insights into what is/ain't working with each, I interviewed a dozen distro-savvy AIR member/producers and indie-friendly PDs.

Public Radio Exchange

[PRX's description](#) of themselves is spot on: "an online marketplace for distribution, review, and licensing of public radio programming." And with 100,000 members, they are surely a "growing social network and community of listeners, producers, and stations." Their goal, though, of "collaborating to reshape public radio" has perhaps not yet come to pass.

Of the 1,500-plus non-commercial, non-religious stations ([700 CPB funded](#)), only 150 use PRX programming; and of those, most acquire less than an hour per week. While most stations do not use PRX, many of the big ones do: "We have almost all the top 50 market stations representing the vast majority of the public radio audience," reports PRX head [Jake Shapiro](#). "We also have LP [Low-Power] FMs and stations not on PRSS/NPR."

This makes PRX a good conduit for producers to large stations, and the only online distro connection to some smaller ones. Jake ran some numbers: "Forty-three percent of pieces on PRX have been licensed at least once." Since 2003, stations have collectively played PRX pieces 40,000 times.

Producer [Nancy Solomon](#) recently posted her first piece on PRX: "The interface works great; I was pleasantly surprised how easy it was. Their help desk was super helpful and easy to get a hold of. I like the way the page looks; I like the way it's laid out and the flexibility the format gives you to put both segments

and whole pieces up. I was also amazed and pleased at how accessible John Barth was to talk about how best to promote the show."

So, if a radio piece falls in the PRX forest, will a PD hear the sound? Not always. "Producers putting stuff on PRX is like thousands of crack addicts selling their junk on street corners," says Charles Lane, producer, WHSU News reporter, and former PRX election curator. "We're just curious street exhibits with sad eyes hoping programmers might spot our wares, as they race to wherever they're going."

But what producers really want to know is: How's it work? And: How rich will I get?

The answer to the first question is: Great. To the second: Not very.

To quote producer Jonathan Miller: "Homelands has felt well-served by PRX, although we'd all starve in a hurry if we depended on it for income.

PRX Point\$

The PRX economy is based on "points." Producers charge points for their pieces, and stations pay for points to "license" the broadcast rights. At minimum, points translate to \$0.50 per minute for each station license. Larger stations pay more per point, so producers get more per point. The current average point-per-payment is \$0.88. So A 10-minute piece licensed by 100 stations would net at least \$500, and an average of \$880.

In real world, though, even the most-licensed pieces rarely get more than 30 licenses. One producer I talked to had a sky-high annual income of \$15,000 from PRX. Few others — even those who sold the most — ever made more than \$2,000/year. (Full disclosure: *Hearing Voices* cashed \$4,000 in PRX checks last year, thank you very much.)

PRX has recently negotiated outside purchaser agreements with BBC, CBC, and PRI series, and with iTunes. This may mean more piasters in producer pockets.

PRX Past

PRX started with \$2 million in seed money from CPB. Since then, they have run on station fees, member fees, and foundation grants. (MacArthur Foundation singled them out in 2008 for a \$500,000 Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.)

Year one PRX expenses were \$500,000. Now they run on \$2 million per year (mainly personnel and contracted services; includes outside projects like their iPhone Player, the Economy Collaboration, FluPortal, and American Archive).

In their 5.5 years of operation, producers have only been paid \$1 million — the total royalty payments since 2003. The 2009 royalty payments totaled \$179,000. Caveat: Producers often offer pieces for no charge, in hopes of increasing station carriage. About 40 percent of licensed pieces are free, so aren't reflected in above royalty tally.

PRX Process

In areas other than money, PRX is a colossal success. Station use is going up: In PRX's first two years, there were fewer than 4,000 station-licenses of pieces; in 2008 alone, there were 9,000. They have innovated the way producers and programmers connect.

Stations join PRX for a sliding scale of \$500–\$6,000 yearly fee, which includes 26 hours of programming (i.e., about \$20–\$200/hour). Some stations purchase discounted additional hours (reducing costs to about \$12–\$130/hour).

A \$50 annual fee buys producers the privilege of publishing unlimited audio pieces, with associated text, graphics, and promo material. Each piece gets a custom URL, a convenient link to send stations and post on Web sites. Stations can audition hi-fi MP3s, then license/download satellite-quality MP2.

The PRX review system created a dialogue where none existed. Their weekly newsletter, front-page features, flexible search engine, links to "related" pieces, ratings, playlists, tags, and topic lists give stations a fighting chance of finding what they want, and of discovering things they never knew existed. Several of PRX's most active station-users told me they make it part of their job every week to "cruise" through the new published pieces. "I surf, follow recommendations, check producers I'm familiar with. One thing leads to another," says Hawk Mendenhall of KUT-Austin. He needs PRX to fill his weekly slot (The Best of Public Radio) with an hour-long program, and a three-hour weekly show (O'Dark 30) with shorter pieces. (Hawk publishes his playlists at PRX.)

PRX is the first and still only one-stop way for producers to distribute pieces, track station carriage, and receive royalties. Producer Richard Paul sums it up: "Would I like to make ten times more from PRX than I do, sure. But PRX gives me money I otherwise wouldn't have. It's an important part of the system, a wonderful innovation technologically, plus a way for producers to get paid. It serves me well."

ContentDepot

PRSS ContentDepot is NPR's distro mechanism. Even some experienced indies don't realize they too can use it. For a single \$25 lifetime fee, producers can make their audio available to the 400-plus PRSS-interconnected stations.

To post a piece at ContentDepot, PRSS charges producers \$182/stereo-hour (billed in 0.25-hour increments; \$95/mono-hour; add \$16/hr if you need insurance). Stations buy-in on a sliding scale, from \$500-\$3550 for Internet access to all programs on ContentDepot (or up to \$7100 for satellite delivery of files and live program streams).

PRSS more than breaks even every year from those station-connect and producer-hour fees. PRSS ContentDepot is where stations get the bulk of their programming, 400,000 hours per year, including NPR's daily news mags and work by the 200-plus registered producers. Stations can get programs via the ContentDepot Web site or the closed pubradio satellite system — kind of a fast, private Internet.

For series distribution, ContentDepot is especially station friendly. Once they've "subscribed" to a show, new episodes and promos automatically upload onto their station hard drives.

Stations can subscribe to audition or broadcast either an entire series, a single episode in a series, or a stand-alone special. Producers can generate reports of which stations subscribed to which of their programs. (We at *Hearing Voices* use PRSS regularly to distribute our weekly episodes and promos. Works great.)

One big difference for producers: At PRX you can charge for your program, and your check just shows up in the mail. At ContentDepot, you can specify a program cost. And stations do pay per program fees, which can total hundreds of thousands of dollars yearly. But those fees are not paid to PRSS, but rather directly to the networks and producers — the PRSS system offers no way to collect.

You'll need to bill the station yourself, and divine who/where to send an invoice from the subscription reports — which lists the station name, but not the programmer who took your piece. So unless you've got a billing system in place and good contact info for stations, good luck gettin' paid.

Station staff also tell me ContentDepot is ill-suited for discovering new programs. One PD called their search engine "slow" and "laborious." Viki Merrick, who fills four-hours weekly with indie hours for WCAI's Arts & Ideas, gets limited series, such as *America Abroad*, *American Radio Works*, and *Radio Lab* from ContentDepot, but says, "PRX is where I go to look for stuff, to wander around."

Distro Dollars

That's the basics of PRX and PRSS. Stations spend far more time on PRSS than PRX. Producers post far more pieces on PRX. Many producers distribute a program on both (PDs like options). To sum up the costs:

	Producer Costs		Stations Costs	
	<i>Member Fee:</i>	<i>To Publish Programs:</i>	<i>Member Fee:</i>	<i>Includes Programming?:</i>
PRX	\$50 yearly	\$0/hr	\$500-\$6K/yr	Yes, 26 hours
PRSS	\$25 lifetime	\$95-182/hr	\$500-7,100/yr	No, 0 hours

So, the good news: Getting your pieces to PDs is way easier and cheaper than a decade ago.

The okay news: Online distro systems are now in place that imply the possibility of a business model someday for some pubradio producers.

The same news: Making a living as an indie producer is still rough.

In part two of our distro discussion, we'll delve into just how stations and producers are using these new online opportunities. We'll examine what's selling and who's buying. We'll ask what stations want and how long they want it. We'll share some suggestions for PRX and PRSS improvements. And we'll consider the "free" in "freelance."



Listen to the AIRMuse

Breakout: AIRster Roman Mars does the REMix

http://www.airmedia.org/AIRblast/audio/AIRmuse_February10.mp3

"Confessions of a Heavy User": Producer Gregg McVicar delivers on ContentDepot (8:41)

http://www.airmedia.org/AIRblast/audio/AIRmuse_April10.mp3

Unpacking PRSS and PRX: Distro Dancing (Part 2)

April 5, 2010

By Barrett Golding

In our last [AIRblast](#), we sent Barrett Golding on a fact-finding mission to uncharted territories of pubradio distribution, where [PRX](#) and [PRSS ContentDepot](#) reign. He explained the mechanics of how each work, and discovered that getting your work to Program Directors is easier and cheaper than ever. Now he's back to clue us in to what's selling and who's buying.

Really, we're talking about money, aren't we? So before re-delving into distro, let's devote some lines to monetary matters.

Producers cobble together program production budgets mainly by: getting grants from funding agencies (e.g. CPB, private foundations); and/or, collecting fees for broadcast rights, paid directly to producers by the shows or stations (NPR, KQED, *Marketplace*, etc.) that airs the program.

Making a quality program can cost from \$10K to \$50K per hour (see CPB-funded radio programs). According to *AIR's Pitch Page*, few program-acquirers pay more than \$100/minute, equivalent to \$6K/hr. (One bright note: *This American Life* pays double and sometimes triple that of other series, G-d bless 'em.) Producers can sometimes negotiate higher rates. More often, though, they try to find additional funding.

The Free in Freelance

Lately, this viable but fragile business model is showing signs of coming unglued.

These are dark days in the indie world. The two most freelance-friendly radio shows (*Weekend America* and *Day to Day*) got canceled in 2009. The remaining NPR shows had their freelance-acquisition budgets slashed. And CPB hasn't issued a Radio Program Fund request-for-proposals since December 2006. Together, these cuts total several millions of \$US that once annually went into indie productions.

But we independents are hunter-gatherers, proficient at piecing together a living from diverse sources. Maybe that's what makes us such versatile storytellers.

If fewer shows are buying, and fewer pieces are being bought, why do producers flood both ContentDepot and the Public Radio Exchange (PRX) with free programs? Often the reason is they have production funding in place (grants, etc.). Now their goal is maximum airplay. They're hoping no-cost will translate into higher carriage.

Not necessarily: 40% of all pieces on PRX are free, but 59% of the PRX *Most-Licensed Pieces* lists are *not* free. So cost and carriage aren't always proportional. Program Directors (PDs) tell us quality and topicality can trump price.

For this article we talked to six of the most active acquirers of indie pieces. Only one was concerned with cost when choosing a program. The rest ended every year with unused PRX program-purchasing "points", so piece-price was not a big factor.

PRX "recommends starting with the default price," then, "if you sell content, raising the price." Executive Director Jake Shapiro calculates more than half "of individual producers earned more than they paid for their membership. Most of what PRX receives from stations it pays out to producers: "At least 80% of station fees goes to the royalty pool for producers."

Producer Richard Paul sells a lot of stories on PRX. He believes, "Producers should put a value on their show. If you offer it for nothing, stations will consider it worthless."

Homelands Jonathan Miller agrees: "The [PRX] dollars are very small, but if we were to put *any* work into trying to sell our old stuff on our own it would be extremely inefficient."

He points out, though, he does sometimes contact a show about re-selling a piece, and when they take it "the pay has been incomparably better" than PRX. "For instance, *World Vision Report* picked up a piece [*originally on Marketplace*] I'd done about a marathon runner for their show before the NYC Marathon. They paid \$750. I'm afraid to look at what I would have gotten from a PRX sale — maybe \$24?"

One producer was more pessimistic: "What is so revolutionary about a forum where radio directors can download stories for free (or thereabouts)? I do not post on PRX because the concept that we should fundraise for our work beforehand, then offer it to the customers for free, is bunk. If people can't pay for the product, the 'business model' is not a viable business."

Hour of Power

At this point, we should distinguish between hour-long programs which producers distribute direct to stations and shorter pieces which air within existing series (NB: many producers produce short pieces, then package them into hours.)

Stations want hours. Overwhelmingly the pieces they pull from ContentDepot and PRX are hour-long programs.

Peddling a short piece via these online distro outlets alone will *not* get you substantial station carriage — statistically, at least. Genevieve Sponsler, who compiles the PRX *Most-Licensed Pieces* lists, has noticed, “Over the years what’s been consistently most popular is 54 or 59-minute pieces.” In fact, every one of PRX’s “most-licensed” was a single or multiple hour (2004, 05, 06, 07, 08, 09; also see *Most Licensed Piece Lengths* 06, 07, 09.)

Some quick calculations: the most-licensed pieces are all hours, and were licensed 20-40 times. So pieces less than an hour, even popular ones, have fewer than twenty licenses.

Let’s say your 10-minute piece was bought by 15 stations. This might net you a PRX check for \$130 (average PRX payment is not quite \$1/minute/station). Not bad if you sold it before to a national series. But meager if that’s the only income it generates — and remember this best-case scenario is for a very successful short.

Now let’s look at some well-played hours, such as Paul Ingles’ music specials. He once distributed them via Public Radio International. PRI paid him \$3.5K in production support and helped with the marketing.

In 2007 PRI could no longer offer him that support. Ingles decided to try distributing exclusively via PRX. His specials tend to be two hours long, and can get 40 licenses. This nets him \$4K from PRX — \$500 more than PRI paid (though, he estimates, maybe 20 stations fewer in carriage).

Because he has “streamlined the production process,” has a great track record with PDs, includes a lot of music, and has low overhead, that \$4K covers the cost of making the hours: PRX pays the bills. He says, “It’s like getting a small grant.”

But, he cautions, his specials cover very PD-desired topics (e.g., “the most popular band in the world”), and are often tied to an event or anniversary. “Unless the subject is wildly popular to general audience,” the piece will likely have less PRX success.

What PDs Want

In talking to PDs, other preferences emerged. Stations get most of their regular weekly programming from ContentDepot (*Morning Edition*, *This American Life*, etc.). But few PDs find pieces for their flexible “specials” slots there. Some PDs never go to ContentDepot; their ops folk deal with that.

Todd Melby fills KFAI’s weekly *Listening Lounge* with PRX pieces. There are several things he “never wants,” chief among them: “No profanity. Why is it even allowed?” What words are out? Since this article isn’t FCC-censured, we can list them: “Definitely ‘fuck’ and ‘shit’ and probably ‘cunt.’” In general, “a mention of sex is not a problem. And “‘nigger’ depends on context.” Another of his “never-wants” is a host intro; edit that off before posting.

John Dankosky of WNPR also requires audio “self-contained, needing no production on our end.” He finds, “too much needs to be heavily edited.” A related piece peeve is stories “with even a whiff of outdated-ness, referring to President Bush instead of Obama,” for instance. “Clean up” your piece lists, he advises; “some stuff shouldn’t be there. There’s too many options, and pieces which aren’t up to date.”

(A good resource to find what programming PDs prefer is PRX’s real-time list of recently purchased pieces.)

Dear PRX

AIR surveyed its members in March 2009 ([PDF](#)). They found 13% distribute via PRSS while 65% use PRX. Of the latter, 55% said their PRX use was minimal, 24% said moderate, and 3% heavy.

For this article, almost all the of comments offered by PDs and producers were about PRX. Their most common comment: “I love PRX.” When prodded to suggest improvements, many had ideas about how pieces get discovered by programmers.

Producer Nancy Solomon was “a little frustrated with how much promotion” [PRX-project](#) series get. “This has nothing to do how worthy those shows are, but it frustrates me to see those shows practically live on the PRX home page, while my documentary got one week — it’s no fun being on the outside.”

She worries this practice might “muddy the relationship of trying to build a co-op distribution network. If the mission of PRX is to widen access to the airwaves to independent producers, then it seems problematic to me to heavily promote PRX sponsored projects; then it just becomes another network/distribution company.”

WNPR’s John Dankosky says “run it like newspaper.” Put stories “happening right now on the front page. Have columnists: the music guy, the news person, the guy who can’t stand Ira Glass.” Otherwise, he says, “stuff won’t get found. We’re awash in sea of programming and don’t have time to sift thru it all.”

[WCAI](#)’s Viki Merrick would find helpful: “more PRX lists” of topic-related programs, and “a way to tag a piece to go back and look at later, to bookmark it, without telling world about it.” (PRX already allows publicly viewable favorites and playlists; private bookmarks are under consideration.)

Some lament the loss of the PRX Editorial Board, hired to generate reviews. Merrick misses Ed-Board opinions “from people like Bill McKibben.”

One former paid reviewer questions “their transition to user reviews. I can understand this is the model to shoot for — but I question whether it works very well. I put a lot of time and effort into my reviews, and people valued them.”

But user-generated critiques unquestionably help PDs find pieces. “I read the reviews,” says KUOW’s [Arvid Hokanson](#). “I look at the ratings, and who did the rating.”

Charles Lane of [WHSU News](#) wishes there were a way to “target certain stations.” Mountain West stations would likely want to know about a piece on the Rocky Mountains, for example. Right now PRX offers “no easy way to tell them all about a really great story.”

A central issue that remains for producers like Nancy Soloman is that “carriage is pretty low. That’s not PRX’s fault, but it’s a problem we, the public radio community, need to deal with.” She has some ideas. “A place to start is the Program Directors, and their conference. I think PRX and AIR, jointly, need to sponsor events that bring producers together with PDs. One person suggested a speed dating type event, where you get five minutes with a PD to pitch your doc/show.”

Paul Ingles would also like to see PRX and AIR “advocate to PDs to free up more documentary hour slots, to create places” for specials in their schedule, “like [Sundays at Cape Cod](#).” He suggests, “maybe host a lunch at the [PRPD](#).”

Isn’t That Special

PDs often say they’d like a specials slot; they hope to have a specials slot; they just haven’t got around to opening up one yet.

Hearing Voices is now a weekly series, but we once created stand-alone specials. In 2005 we wondered how many stations had a committed spot on their for hour specials. We inspected the programming schedules for all the top metro stations, all station networks (i.e., pubcasting entities with multiple stations),

and the 100+ stations who regularly played *HV* specials. In all, we looked at 220 public radio skeds, representing programming on 700+ different stations (i.e., call-letters).

What we found: a total of 26 program schedules (for 74 stations) had hour-specials slots (11% of stations).

Some crotchety old fart was quoted in *Current* when PRX launched in 2003:

Money isn't the point for independent producer Barrett Golding. What does matter is access to stations, particularly non-NPR stations that do not subscribe to the Public Radio Satellite System. "That's worth more money to me, because I can then go get funding," he says.

Normally, I'd dismiss anything uttered by that quack "Golding" (if that's even his real name); but other more-esteemed producers have expressed similar sentiments. [Dmae Roberts](#) is unsure "if PRX made a significant impact yet. But it's still growing; and it's nice to put on a grant proposal. It's a good resource." A public resource, she explains, "a great place to archive our stories, and to hear things for the first time, especially for people not so familiar independents' work."

Depot Distro

The Big Daddy of pubradio distribution is ContentDepot, delivering 400,000 hours every year. Programs come from the 200+ registered producers — national networks and individual indies, and flow to 430 interconnected stations.

It's run by the Public Radio Satellite System. PRSS leases bands on a communication [satellite](#). Whatever bandwidth public radio doesn't use is sold commercially. This covers half their \$10M annual operating costs. Station [interconnect](#) fees and producer [program-distribution](#) charges must pay for the rest.

PRSS is managed and located at NPR, but owned by a separate [charitable trust](#). "It's housed at the mothership," says [Peter Loewenstein](#), NPR VP of Distribution, "but NPR is also one of PRSS's biggest customers — it pays a hefty share."

ContentDepot is where stations get most of their series and many of their specials. PRSS outperforms PRX in its auto-delivery of weekly series episodes, and its mass-messaging system, that better connects producers with stations. And ContentDepot can feed programs live, which PRX cannot.

But ContentDepot is *not* the place to put single short programs; PDs are much less likely to find it there than on PRX. PRX has a superior search engine. It has an active review process, including it's 100K of public members. (PRSS is a service for stations and producers only, and not open to the public.)

PRX more aggressively promotes individual programs than does PRSS. PRX Producers get unlimited storage at no cost other than their yearly member fee. PRSS charges producer per hour for storage (and requires insurance.)

Both provided us additional info since our [previous article](#). Here's an updated table of comparisons:

	Producers–			Stations–			Distro
	<i>No. of Members:</i>	<i>Member Fee:</i>	<i>To Publish Programs:</i>	<i>No. of Members</i>	<i>Member Fee:</i>	<i>Includes Programming?:</i>	<i>Annual Hours:</i>
PRX	2216	\$50 yearly	\$0/hr	213	\$500-\$6K/yr	Yes, 26 hours	7K
PRSS	200	\$25 lifetime	\$95-182/hr	430	\$500-7,100/yr	No, 0 hours	400K
*PRX 2009 active station members up %42 from 2008.							

Producers often use both PRX and PRSS to distribute their work, and the two organizations have had conversations about working together... someday. Until then, producers will continue use to us both these online outlets as part of their distribution strategy.

(See related piece: *From the Ground Up: A New Paradigm for Independent Program Development and Distribution*

One last note: Whether you distribute with PRX, PRSS, or on your own, don't forget about marketing: i.e., making stations aware your series/story exists. Best bet for better carriage is often an experienced marketer. (AIR members Izzy, Kathy, Ken, Steve, and Sue are among the best). Expect to spend at least 10% of your total budget for minimal but effective marketing; 25% is not unrealistic for a full-on campaign. And thank your stars you're not a movie-maker where the marketing budget can be half to twice the size of the film's production budget.

Barrett Golding is Fearless Leader of the independently produced Hearing Voices radio rodeo, and a regular user of PRSS and PRX.

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