the transom review

Public Radio Exchange

Jake Shapiro & Steve Schultze

Intro from Jay Allison

The idea for the PRX was born on Transom (here and then here), and we are proud to feature its premiere now. Along with the Station Resource Group and Atlantic Public Media, Jake and Steve shepherded this project through the mazes of online rights management, to the creation of a virtual economy, to software design in St. Petersburg, Russia. If you believe in destiny, they were supposed to have these jobs.

Read of their journeys to this point, and then help us refine this new tool for shaping the future of public radio.

The PRX Manifes-doh!
From Jake Shapiro & Steve Schultze

Jake Shapiro

We haven't exactly spelled out a Public Radio Exchange "declaration of principles" but we recently came up with a pretty good tag line: "What do you want to hear on the radio?"

It's got a little cheese in it like any tag line inevitably does. But it has that sense of openness - an invitation to help shape the sound coming over the airwaves. The PRX brings together that democratic impulse of the Internet and the far reach of broadcast radio.

That's one of the strengths of the PRX idea - that locally-run noncommercial radio stations can be allies in the effort to find new voices, new ideas, and new ways to connect in a diverse and complex world. It's one thing to put up a website and say you've now

established a global media presence. It's another to engage hundreds of stations in communities across the country, and the world, and help them find new and important work to bring to their audiences on the radio and on their own sites and streams.

Now, you have to be a bit of an optimist to see the public radio system as a bold partner, eager for risk-taking and pushing the envelope in this endeavor. But I believe there is indeed a critical mass of people who get it, and who will use the PRX to make a difference. I guess I'm an optimist, which is probably one reason they hired me.

I think we're on to something big with this PRX thing. It is sort of revolutionary and it is happening at just the right media moment. Public radio is strong and growing but it needs a kick. It needs new talent, new voices, new ideas, new models, new ways to connect its listeners to the world. It needs to stand out in a competitive and converging media marketplace, and it needs to figure out what public service media means in a commercialized consumer culture. It needs the PRX!

I'm eager to tap into the collective wit and wisdom of Transom talk, because everyone has a stake in the PRX. Weigh in and help us make it better.

I signed on to this adventure a little over a year ago in August 2002. It is a great job, uncannily capturing just about all the things I'm interested in doing and somehow drawing on the random skills and experiences I've acquired along the way. Prior to this I had been working at the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard Law School, where I am still a Fellow (I am not a lawyer, but I play one on the radio). The Berkman Center is "a research program founded to explore cyberspace, share in its study, and help pioneer its development". It's a place where they try to figure out what the heck is going on in the shifting sands of technology, law, and policy. There's a ton of projects at the Berkman Center, many having to do with developing countries, intellectual property and digital media, as well as teaching and advocacy in the field of Internet law. Some things worth checking out include: Chilling Effects, Creative Commons, H20, IXPs.
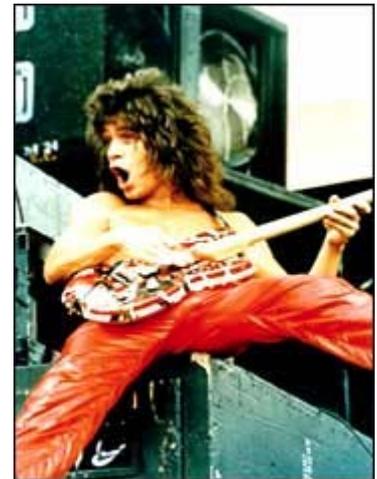
Prior to that I had been a producer on The Connection with Christopher Lydon - a daily call-in talk show from WBUR Boston, distributed by PRI for a while and then NPR. That experience was my trial-by-fire introduction to public radio. First and foremost, it was an absolutely wonderful show - the best of its kind on public radio then and since. It had a great team of producers led by the dynamic duo of senior producer Mary McGrath and host **Christopher Lydon**, and together we created two hours a day of really riveting stuff. Then in February 2001 it all exploded in a flaming ball of craziness and the rest is history. If you really want to hear the stories buy me a drink at the next public radio conference….

Prior to that…. Well, no need to dig back too far. Some other relevant stuff is that I've been a musician all my life, playing guitar and cello, singing a bit, messing around on drums. I've been in various independent rock bands continuously since age 12, when I thought I might have a shot at being Eddie Van Halen some day. With this last band, Two Ton Shoe, we jumped into the web world way back in 1995 with help from a friend at the MIT Media Lab, and we've had some success on MP3.com (140,000 downloads and counting). The indie musician perspective and the Internet-driven upheaval in the music business got me thinking about new models for connecting artists to audiences, and to each other (a friend and I have been playing around with a site called GigSwap).

So when the Exchange idea came along and there was a job opening to help build and run the thing, I just had to be involved somehow. It's a perfect gig and I'm sort of strangely qualified for it!

There is a fabulous team of people working on this project. There's Tom Thomas and Terry Clifford, co-CEOs of the Station Resource Group (SRG) "a strategy-focused consortium of leading public radio stations." Tom and Terry have been movers and shakers in public radio for a very long time -- they started the National Federation of Community Broadcasters, among other accomplishments. Tom and Terry bring a great insiders' sense of how the system as a whole operates and how stations are navigating through it these days.

Then there is this guy Jay Allison, who knows a thing or two about public radio, the internet, and so on. I can't say enough about Jay, so I won't. And then there is the "new guy" Steve Schultze. He's the PRX Technical Manager and has been a linchpin of the entire project; from the early research looking at software options, audio standards, and existing technology; to drawing up the first blueprint for building the PRX; to overseeing the development process with our team of Russian programmers; to writing his own bits of code and various scripts to make the thing work; to devising the custom PRX audio encoder and uploader tools; to burning much midnight oil in the last several months to get the whole shebang up and running. Steve comes to the PRX with a shockingly recent degree in Philosophy and Computer Science, most of which is being put to good use these days. We haven't had much need for his landscaping expertise, but who knows what PRX version 2.0 might offer in the way of tools and services...

Steve Schultze

I was running away from technology.

I'd worked with computers since I was a kid, so it was inevitable that at some point I would try to escape into nature. It ended up being mostly just overgrown lawns, but my summer landscaping job was Emersonian as far as I was concerned. My boss said it would be good for me to "get a little air between my ears." I planted flowers, spread mulch, and pulled weeds. And it was good.

One time we were at a house where the soil had been beaten down so hard that we couldn't get anything to grow. Water would run off and roots wouldn't take hold. We had to get a roto-tiller and a gas-powered auger to drill holes in the ground. I realized that sometimes you have to get out the heavy technology to carve out space for new life.

Near the end of the summer, my boss assigned me to a job at a neglected old mansion. The property had just been bought by a new owner who was fixing it up and dividing it into smaller living spaces, mostly rented to younger people like myself. There was a garden surrounding it that clearly hadn't been cared for in recent history. My responsibility was to clean it out, remove the vines that choked the good plants, decide where to make new flower beds, and prune overgrown bushes.

It took weeks. I would sometimes talk to the carpenters who were replacing broken banisters and fixing transoms that had swollen shut. We would bump into the new residents as they carried in their couches and tables and paintings. Some parts of the garden just needed to be weeded and spruced up a little bit. In other areas, I discovered that when I cleaned them up there was room for new plants. Sometimes I didn't know what to do, and now I wish I'd asked the new residents.

I first heard about the budding PRX project after a long day of digging at hard clay. I'd never heard of Transom or Atlantic Public Media or Public Radio Core Values. I did have an undying love for public radio, spawned (like so many of my peers) by This American Life. When Jay described his vision for an Internet technology that would help bring new voices to public radio, I was intrigued but skeptical. I was running from computers. On the other hand, my back was sore.

A year later, I find myself landscaping again, with another fantastic crew. We try to make the best use of the technology we have, but in the end it's about carving out space for new life, watering, fertilizing, and a little TLC. This time I want to enlist the new and old residents of this public radio estate. Tell us where you'd like the rhododendron, and

whether you like violets you think they're a weed. Remind us if we're not watering enough. Make sure we're helping you to protect your interests and promote your work. If something is being crowded out by bushes, tell us so we can move it right up front. If you'd like, you can even care for one of the flower beds.

A Conversation w/ Jake Shapiro & Steve Schultze

PRX Paving
Nannette - *October 29, 2003 - #15*

I like the comparison with landscape design…the first thing that comes to mind for me is how landscapers wait to pave paths until after people show how they want to travel among buildings... is there an equivalent here?

Estate Engineer
Steve Schultze - November 6, 2003 - #33

Absolutely! At least that's how it's supposed to work. I've been influenced quite a bit by the folks at Adaptive Path, who focus on practical user-focused web design. I think they take their name from that practice exactly. There has been some interesting research involving footprints and web navigation, and you probably know that we have something related called "footprints" in PRX. For us, all this means listening to the users and building the tools to work the way that humans (and more specifically, producers, stations, and reviewers) expect them to work…

…Whether the situation is arranging the location of houses or designing how web users interact, the messages are the same:

1.   watch how people live
2.   community is key

… As new tenants of the public radio estate inherit rooms and courtyards, a certain amount of remodeling is natural…We don't think that this is the perfect structure, and we need you to tell us where it's getting muddy and we should pave.

The PRX Generation
Nannette - *October 26, 2003 - #11*

Could you go over how PRX was born or conceived?

Group Grope
Jay Allison - *October 27, 2003 - #13*

The PRX was originally an idea of mine dubbed the "Interested Stations Group" which grew from a local "documentary DJ" show I host at our local stations and the interface of public radio and the Internet that occurs here on Transom. I began writing about the idea here in topics on Transom (here and then here), and it gathered some momentum, especially when Terry Clifford and Tom Thomas of SRG joined up. Laura Welsh of the NEA and Jeff Ramirez and Kay Tuttle of CPB were also very helpful in getting the idea off the ground and making it real.

Interestingly, we are now pondering ways that Transom and PRX can combine energies and grow together. We'd be interested in anyone's thoughts on that.

Carrier's Canon
Jackson - *October 26, 2003 - #10*

…are there others out there who imagine PRX as a potential critique domain?
I guess I am following a thought that Scott Carrier raised on one of the pages here at Transom: A piece is done once it airs. Does posting a piece on PRX constitute airing or is the site another workshop?

First, They Shop
jake - *October 26, 2003 - #12*

This first incarnation of the PRX is definitely aimed at work that is "radio ready". It's set up as a marketplace for stations to acquire work for broadcast, so it wouldn't make sense to introduce unfinished pieces or works-in-progress into the system at the moment.

However, the uploading/describing/auditioning/reviewing/searching tools are very well suited to training and mentoring, so we envision other versions of the PRX with separate but connected "training facilities" for various groups or projects to use.

There may be some intermediate step we can take, like creating a "works in progress" category reserved exclusively for this purpose.

The Octopus Tool
Jay Allison - *November 4, 2003 - #20*

The thing I always say about PRX is that it's a tool. It's not an end in itself, it's a way to make things happen. Practically every day someone comes up with a new application -- e.g. groups of stations comparing airchecks, a nexus for stations sharing an affinity in place or style, private "function rooms" for training, producer teams offering "offshore editing" to stations or fellow producers.

This weekend, with Dave Isay, we started developing the idea of using the PRX to coordinate station involvement in upload/download of the StoryCorps project. Same with youth radio groups and others.

Review Rough
Mary McGrath - *November 4, 2003 - #22*

PRX represents a sample of what's out there in pub radioland at any given time. Unlike Transom, the pieces haven't been screened so the content is uneven as one would expect. The reviews, though, aren't reviews the way we usually think of them. My understanding is that they're meant to let stations know roughly what the pieces are about and how they might creatively be used. You don't want reviewers to "pan" pieces or to provide criticism the way book reviewers or movie reviewers do. If so, in the effort at desnarkification…is anything lost? Or do you have a different editorial "voice" in mind?

Snarki-less
Jay Allison - *November 4, 2003 - #23*

Snarkiness, as much fun as it is, doesn't seem to serve a useful purpose in the PRX context, which is not so much a forum for critique, but for getting good work to air.

Adventurous work and new voices have a hard enough time getting to national media without ambushes along the way. Think of the PRX Reviews more as "Recommendations" with qualifications.

Candidly
Amy O'Leary - *November 4, 2003 - #25*

…It was my understanding that the reviews were supposed to tell station managers whether or not I would like to hear that particular piece on the air or not - I was kind of taking the tag line at it's word: "What do you want to hear on the radio?"

But when I look at the reviews it seems like there's a lot of cheerleading…I wonder if there's not something structural about the PRX system that might be at play here.

HERE'S THE THING: I love that PRX makes it so easy to connect with the PRX community. You can see who's looking at what stuff, you can see who's looking at you. All these connectivity tools (so well thought out!) populate a virtual space in a way that most other online communities don't do nearly as well. HOWEVER, does this close connectivity make it difficult for people to be as candid as they might like to be?

Finding The Waterline
Jay Allison - *November 4, 2003 - #26*

…We have three constituencies - Uploaders (people who make the programs), Downloaders (stations) and Listeners. Finally, the point of the PRX is to get more good programs on stations for listeners to hear.

Okay, so how does reviewing fit in? It helps producers get their good stuff in front of stations and have it recognized. It gives stations some help in weeding through material and selecting stuff they want. It not only delivers good stuff to listeners on the radio, but it allows them to take part in the selection.

Judgments about programming can be both useful and painful. We are trying to get the benefits without too much pain. At present, we ask that if you don't like something, you just don't write about it. We feel pans don't help surface good work. That phrase, to surface good work, is the main intent of the reviews and our policies. If you notice mostly good reviews, it's probably a function of that policy. It's not supposed to be about cheerleading exactly, but it is supposed to flag the good stuff. And candidness is encouraged, but, I suppose, just not beneath a certain level.

Think about the constituencies we're serving and see if you can help refine our system. What do you think of the various levels of the review structure -- Editorial Board, Sounding Board, and Vox Pop? Do you think the five-point rating is a good idea? Again, it's a "recommendation" because the points answer the question, "How much do you want to hear this on the radio?" but no matter how much we try to sweeten it, low is low and high is high. Life is tough. We recognize that, and we recognize that judgments are being made in this context that can have a real effect on people's work, so we want to ensure that our policies make the effect as constructive as possible.

Love-In: The PRX Lounge
Jackson - *November 4, 2003 - #28*

…I wonder about the five-point rating system in combination with the comment…My guess, if one were to tally up all the reviews and average them out, we would probably end up with a typical score somewhere between the very high 3s and the low 4s here in the PRX Lounge. As Bill Murray would say, there's a lot of love in this room.

Impartial On The Island
Noah Miller - *November 5, 2003 - #29*

I agree with Jackson that the reviewing system is currently awash in a surfeit of love. We all want to support each other and see each other do well. The world of public radio is so small and so full of nice people that none of us really wants to vote anyone off the island.

Which is why, as Jay says, the emphasis is on surfacing the good work, rather than panning the rest. Jay, you suggest if we don't like a piece, we should simply leave it unreviewed. But don't you think that's a bit dishonest, or at least ambiguous? How are downloaders supposed to distinguish between a lousy piece that's been listened to 20 times and left unreviewed, and a great piece that no one has ever had the time to listen to? It seems to me that there has to be some way to indicate that a piece has been kept below the surface…

…As much as I'm interested in selling my work as-is to stations, I'm also very interested in what my colleagues and the gal on the street have to say about it. I'm a young producer, and I can use feedback -- "we liked your piece and we'll buy it" is a good kind of feedback, but more important to me at the moment is "here's what we liked, here's what we didn't like, and why".

So how about leaving the reviewing to a selected (impartial?) group, and creating a means for everyone else to simply discuss the work openly -- through Transomesque threaded discussions, for example.

Signal Key Stars
Mary McGrath - *November 6, 2003 - #34*

I think you should continue to air this discussion out. You don't want the vibe here to be -- PRX is great but the reviews are a joke. My own thoughts are that the reviewers should be honest (in a friendly and helpful way...by the way are these meant to serve as feedback to producers at all?) and that the system can take it. No snarkitude but there should be a way to signal that a piece isn't ready for prime time. Maybe the key is in the star ratings…

Score Specific
Christine McKenna - *November 6, 2003 - #35*

…I think everything the Editorial Board listens to should be scored. Submitters then have the choice if they see a poor review online to take their own submission down and rework it and resubmit it. Or they can leave it up there.

As a teacher, I've found that the more specific I can be about expectations, the better students do and the more accepting they are of their grades. So I'd suggest a more explicit set of criteria for how the pieces are reviewed.

What About And Wondering
Jackson - *November 15, 2003 - #50*

Going back to Jay's point that the intentional purpose at PRX is to help the good work surface, the purpose of the review might be, well, not a matter of whether one likes the story or not, but whether one thinks it is a good piece of work. And what constitutes "good"? Technical skill and editing? Fine sound quality? What about writing, voicing? Choice of music?

And all that leads us back to whom we would trust as REVIEWERS. And that leads us to wonder what we in our various ways want from our reviewers…

Review Review
jake - *November 23, 2003 - #56*

Some highlights of our recent decisions and discussions on PRX reviewing:

"Notes to Producer." We will include a separate box on the reviewing page that allows the reviewer to send private notes to the producer about the piece. The idea is that often a reviewer wants to give some technical or editorial advice or comment that wouldn't necessarily be helpful or interesting in context of a general public review. But it can be feedback that is very important to the producer. So the "notes to the producer" box provides a kind of back channel, without the pressure or publicity of the public view.

"Ratings: average to great". Currently we have a 5-point ratings scale that answers the question "How much would you like to hear this piece on the radio?" with 1 being "a little" and 5 being "very much". We decided to try a new 4-point ratings scale that answers the question: "How is this piece compared to what you typically hear on public radio?" "1=Average", "2=Good", "3=Very Good", and "4=Great". There will also be an option for "no rating". Fewer levels will make lower ratings more likely (in an effort to avoid the "cheerleader effect").

We will also sharpen up our reviewing and rating guidelines to make the criteria and purpose of reviewing clearer. We still want to avoid pans and slams, ad hominen, nasty or dismissive reviews. But there must be room for real critique and honest comments about quality and content. If the primary audience for reviews is programming decision-makers shopping for work, then open opinions are the only way to go.

Gimme Some Notes
Jackson - *November 24, 2003 - #57*

I like the "Notes to Producer…I am somewhat less enthralled with the proposed semantic differential as far as the revised grading system goes… If the lowest point on the scale is average, then nothing can be below average…Part of what drives PRX is the whole matter of choice -- not just the choice of material by the programmer but the choice of producers putting their work out there. They can always pull pieces that haven't garnered critical acclaim.

Lots Of Notes
Jackson - *November 25, 2003 - #58*

And what of the critiques? Clearly, this is not what the reviewing process as conveyed above was supposed to do. But I know there are numerous PRX users out there who are using the Review system to get suggestions and editorial comment…Nobody wants to hurt anyone else here, but we all know not everything is ready for air. And many producers also know that not all their stuff is publishable quite yet.

PRX needs to build a brightly marked door that doesn't say "Exit." It says "Critique" instead.

Notes Are Good
Jay Allison - *November 25, 2003 - #59*

…critique is encouraged. The "stars" go from average to great, but there is also an option for "no rating" this gives people a chance to show they listened but did not rate, and include their comments too. Some can be for public consumption, others direct to the producer.

We think this gives us a rating system that encourages a full range of marks to separate and surface the decent stuff, plus an option for "below average" by not marking. A producer can always take the critique and come back for re-marking.

Some Notes Are Better Than Others
Barrett Golding - *November 25, 2003 - #60*

the way i view PRX, the most important reviews are those from station-programming staff. all other reviewers' opinions are interesting but not central to, what i see as, the main function of PRX: getting shows to stations. w/o station dialog, input and use, prx cannot succeed at this task. so, as to reviews, i think those from station folk should be prominent, and those from listeners/producers should be posted, but, i would suggest, with far less visibility.

producers' support for PRX was quick and enthusiastic, as evidenced by the amount of programming available. i suspect this will always be the case, cuz producers are always dying to get their work heard.

stations however are always inundated from good free programming (sent right to them on satellite and CD). PRX asks stations to pay and to go get programming. i think they will; i think the PRX model of on-demand pick&choose/audition&download is something stations will want and will come to depend on. but they're not there yet. and anything PRX can do to get them there is mission-central…

stations, i believe, will tend to trust reviews by other station folk more than by general listeners and producers. to rate station reviews higher than others makes it easier for stations to see what there colleagues think, and may make it feel like PRX is geared toward them, and encourage more station reviewing and licensing.

Once Again, We Are Sensitive Types
Christine McKenna - *November 26, 2003 - #63*

Love the "Notes to Producer" idea. But you're thinking about a new rating system where the option "no rating" = "below average"? I'm seeing a side to public radio that I never imagined after listening all these years! … Would it really hurt people's feelings that much to read that editors think their work isn't quite ready for broadcast? Even if it did, is protecting submitters' feelings your mission here?

Building on Barrett's point above, the PRX user you need to be most interested in is the station programmer. To make it easier for them to navigate the site and to keep the tone positive online (if that's a priority),

I think you should consider a policy by which the editorial board removes below average pieces from the site…

Mud And Lurking
Jackson - *November 26, 2003 - #64*

If I have understood the principles underlying the creation of PRX, some of them (though I can't remember reading this anywhere in or around here) must turn on the freedom of speech. Obviously, hate works should be droppable by the site masters.

But dropping shouldn't have anything to do with quality. Bad and mediocre material will find its own mud; the lurking question is how the review process at PRX will reveal the good.

An Unreliable Gauge
P.W. Fenton - *December 15, 2003 - #68*

…I'm beginning to question the value of the "review" system. When I read a review and then listen to the piece it refers to, it occurs to me that I rarely agree with the review and/or the rating. That makes me wonder what the reviews, and the ratings are doing to the pieces, and if any of the reviews can be taken seriously. I've read glowing reviews of poorly produced pieces that could only have been written by the producer's parents. I've read negative reviews of quality pieces. I've read positive reviews, full of nothing but praise, but with a rating of just 2 dots... I feel like if a piece had 200 reviews the rating would be inevitably be two and a half dots... telling you nothing.

More and more I feel like the only rating that has any weight behind it would be the one that would show how many licenses have been bought for a piece. That is what all the producers are after... no? Otherwise I feel like the reviews, especially of pieces not yet licensed, serve as more of a distraction than a reliable gauge.

The Law Of More
Jackson - *December 15, 2003 - #69*

…P.W. Fenton is right, of course, that the reviewing system at PRX is somewhat half-cocked. Part of it may turn on the reviewer's chosen role: PDs are going to be thinking of air-freshness; others are simply going to be using whatever skill-sets and ideas that brought them to PRX in the first place.

But between the different types of user/visitor coming to PRX and the many different ways in which people comment on and respond to the pieces, the basic problem, to my mind, is this: PRX will not function adequately until there are at least as many reviews as there are pieces… PRX is a community that will not thrive on silence. Simply put, part of the price of any membership is going to be reviewing…

The nonjudgmental process of posting work on PRX doesn't mean that everything on PRX is airworthy. It is our task as members of the PRX community to give the reviewing process meaning and credibility. Regardless of the tweaking the rating system and evaluation process will go through in the coming months, the only law that will give immediate substance to the reviewing system at PRX is the law of averages -- and with the law of averages, the more, the merrier.

Clearance Clarity
hal - *November 5, 2003 - #31*

…Does the producer have to get clearance from the purchasing entity to post a story to PRX that has previously aired? I've noticed several stories on PRX that have aired on public radio magazine shows, local stations, and NPR.

…Living in a world where I have to pay the mortgage every month, I typically don't do stories without having some sort of agreement to produce for a specific show, magazine, etc. so, I'm still trying to figure out how best to use PRX. Any thoughts on rights?

Depending Distinctions
jake - *November 9, 2003 - #44*

"Who owns what" is indeed a pertinent question these days. PRX requires and assumes that the uploader of the piece owns all necessary rights for using PRX services, namely, distribution to radio stations. Since the producer isn't always the rights holder we call you the "licensor" to make the distinction.

The short answer to your question about whether the producer needs clearance to post to PRX is "it depends". It depends on the contract/agreement you have that governs the distribution and broadcast rights for a piece you've created. Many agreements are non-exclusive and let you retain rights to distribute for broadcast, perhaps after a certain window. Others in the past may have grabbed all those rights from you "in perpetuity" and legally you can't post the piece to PRX. Unfortunately we can't sort that out on your behalf and have to require you to state that you have the rights and clearances squared away.

We intend to develop a more expansive legal guide in our help documentation to give producers more information about rights issues…

Garnership
Jackson - *November 5, 2003 - #32*

My general sense is that if we have been commissioned to create a work for hire and the contract does not specify that we as creators actually own the copyright to the piece, then said work is probably owned by the organism who hired us…Allowing as how we producers, through no foresight of our own, might actually own the copyright to what we have wrought, I wonder how the business model of PRX addresses the needs of producers as rent-paying individuals.

A 1:32 story garners 8 points. I hope and trust that someone at PRX will explicate the dollar value of a point and explain to me, once we have sorted all that out, why I should not

wonder why I garner as much as $12.00 from PRX for a story that might have earned me over $500.00 elsewhere.

Ancillary Royalty
jake - *November 9, 2003 - #45*

PRX is very much intending to address "the needs of producers as rent-paying individuals." When we were first planning the service one option was to leave prices and rates out of the equation entirely, and let producers and stations negotiate directly as they do now. We realized early on that that was missing a big opportunity to create a new marketplace and revenue stream where one does not currently exist.

For the most part, the going rate for distributing work directly to noncommercial radio stations is $0/minute. We're not talking about established national network shows with carriage fees, or the few independent productions that have carved out a niche in paid distribution. Nor are we talking about the one-to-one relationship of a station and a freelancer for a given work-for-hire. But if you have a 1:32 story or a one-hour documentary and try to get 50 stations to cough up a couple hundred dollars each to acquire it, you are not likely to get an encouraging response.

The PRX payment pool addresses this by creating a royalty system: stations pay an annual fee and can license about 120 hours of work; a payment pool is set aside to pay producers whose work has been licensed; a per-minute rate is set based on the amount of money in the pool and the amount of usage over the entire payment period.

At the current rates subscribing stations pay PRX approximately between $0.20 to $1.00 per point, depending on the station size/budget. PRX, in turn, pays producers at a flat point/dollar ratio. In January 2004 we will tally up the results of the first full quarter of PRX usage and only then will we know what the per-point amount will be. For example, if we have $10,000 in the pool and 10,000 points were used by stations, the rate would be $1 per point.

In answer to the question "why I should not wonder why I garner as much as $12.00 from PRX for a story that might have earned me over $500.00 elsewhere", I would say that you should wonder, and you should probably go for the $500 elsewhere, and then put the piece up on PRX! Of course, if 50 stations licensed your piece on PRX at $12 each you'd get $600, but it's no sure thing. You should think of the PRX payment pool as an ancillary royalty payment, not as an acquisition fee that a national show might pay… I'm eager for more questions on the PRX economy, because it's a new idea that is just getting started and it needs poking and prodding by the people we are hoping to pay.

Measures Of Value
Jackson Braider - *November 10, 2003 - #46*

…I guess what I am wondering here is this: is length a real measure of value, or is it only a strange compromise the audio world has arrived it for lack of anything better?…I am perfectly willing to get less than subsistence rates from PRX; the question is this: if we all do, what is there to stop stations from saying, but I can get it for less at PRX?

Concrete And Universal
jake - *November 12, 2003 - #47*

For a while in the early days of planning PRX we tried to think of fair and manageable ways to account for the vastly different levels of effort, experience, quality, and value that each piece on PRX has. There may be a 10 minute interview that took an afternoon in one location to put together all told, and a 10 minute feature that took 10 weeks and lots of travel and expense to create. How can they be considered equal? What about increasing the price of the highest rated pieces?

We stayed out of that can of worms and settled on a flat per-minute rate, because trying to weigh the myriad factors that go into a production is an impossible task in the 1s and 0s of a web application. And from a straight broadcast schedule point of view a minute is a concrete and universal unit of measurement. So, yes, length is exactly the strange compromise you describe....

We did however leave room for the producer to add a premium or a discount to the suggested PRX per-minute point rate, which allows the producer to reflect whatever added value the producer thinks the piece should get, at least to a certain extent.

The ASCAP 4-minute idea is also one we considered, and may take up. There's sense in a "set-up" charge of X points no matter how short the piece is.

We may learn in time that there is a better way to structure the PRX economy, but it's a start…

About Transom

What We're Trying To Do

Here's the short form: Transom.org is an experiment in channeling new work and voices to public radio through the Internet, and for discussing that work, and encouraging more. We've designed Transom.org as a performance space, an open editorial session, an audition stage, a library, and a hangout. Our purpose is to create a worthy Internet site and make public radio better.

Submissions can be stories, essays, home recordings, sound portraits, interviews, found sound, non-fiction pieces, audio art, whatever, as long as it's good listening. Material may be submitted by anyone, anywhere -- by citizens with stories to tell, by radio producers trying new styles, by writers and artists wanting to experiment with radio.

We contract with Special Guests to come write about work here. We like this idea, because it 1) keeps the perspective changing so we're not stuck in one way of hearing, 2) lets us in on the thoughts of creative minds, and 3) fosters a critical and editorial dialog about radio work, a rare thing.

Our Discussion Boards give us a place to talk it all over. Occasionally, we award a Transom.org t-shirt to especially helpful users, and/or invite them to become Special Guests.

Staff

Producer/Editor - *Jay Allison*
Web Director/Designer - *Joshua T. Barlow*
Editors – *Sydney Lewis, Viki Merrick, Chelsea Merz, Jeff Towne, Helen Woodward*
Web Developers - *Josef Verbanac, Barrett Golding*

Advisors

Scott Carrier, Nikki Silva, Davia Nelson, Ira Glass, Doug Mitchell, Larry Massett, Sara Vowell, Skip Pizzi, Susan Stamberg, Flawn Williams, Paul Tough, Bruce Drake, Bill McKibben, Bob Lyons, Tony Kahn, Ellin O'Leary, Marita Rivero, Alex Chadwick, Claire Holman, Larry Josephson, Dmae Roberts, Dave Isay, Stacy Abramson, Gregg McVicar, Ellen Weiss, Ellen McDonnell, Robin White, Joe Richman, Steve Rowland, Johanna Zorn, Elizabeth Meister

Atlantic Public Media administers Transom.org. APM is a non-profit organization based in Woods Hole, Massachusetts which has as its mission "to serve public broadcasting through training and mentorship, and through support for creative and experimental approaches to program production and distribution." APM is also the founding group for *WCAI & WNAN*, a new public radio service for Cape Cod, Martha's Vineyard, and Nantucket under the management of *WGBH*-Boston.