
Kid's Radio Is On The Air!

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Ever since radio's replacement by television as the primary medium of in-home entertainment, people have increasingly relied on the visual images created by others to give form and definition to the world in which they live.

Active listening has been largely replaced by passive viewing, both at home and in the classroom. Though television is an invaluable educational resource, it provides little opportunity for children, and adults, to use their imaginations. The learned skill of generating images within the mind is important when seeking solutions to many critical problems.

Teachers have understand the value of words in stimulating one's own personal imaginary adventures with Tom Sawyer or Huckleberry Finn. But less appreciated by educators has been the use radio, or audio, as a medium for enriching the imaginative capability of both children and adults.

Radio and Imagination

Children imaginatively experience, as the result of listening, a personal world created from their emotionally charged remembrances, dreams, and fantasies. This experience is often stimulated by familiar words, noises, or music. The sound of a holiday song, for an example, may bring a flood of images to mind. The smell of and taste of rich holiday foods, and the sparkle of colored lights, are but a few of the multi-sensory memories a holiday melody may stimulate within the mind. Imagination makes possible the ability to seemingly see, smell, hear, and feel things which do not exist in the present tense.

Radio is a "blind" medium in that it lacks the multi-channel characteristics of television and motion pictures. It relies on a symbolic language which is purely auditory. This includes the use of spoken words, music, sounds, and silence.

Radio is a participatory medium which actively engages the child in the on-going processing of aural information. This requires that the child be able to discriminate between audio stimuli, employ aural decoding skills, and generate meaning for a perceived message. Given that there are no other channels of information except sound, there is the potential risk of ambiguity. But it is this ambiguity which also makes it a particularly effective medium to stimulate the imagination.

An effectively designed radio program may facilitate a child's integration of life-based experiences into a 'movie' created within the 'theater of the mind'. Each child becomes his or her own director with no two children having the same imaginary experience. A dinosaur that a child creates while listening to a science fiction drama, for example, is not the same as one manufactured by Hollywood. It's a very personal dinosaur which comes from that child's own needs, perceptions, joys, fears, and emotionally enriched experiences.

Kids Radio Today

Even though we think of radio, with it's endless rock, rap, or western music, as a background for our daily commute, it can offer much more - as anyone who listens to public radio will

attest. However, the on-air programs specifically for children are, admittedly, few.

Jamie T. Deming, of Children's Radio Productions, has surveyed 97 radio stations related to their efforts in children's programming. She has now published a guide to radio which indicates specific stations and their local programs for children, as well as programs which are syndicated and available nationally.

A review of the guide suggest that children's programs share a common format. Typically there is music, stories, dramas, news, and exploration of issues relevant to kids. When a child turns-on and tunes-in the radio dial, he or she will discover programming that is not only entertaining, but educational as well. An overview of three popular programs illustrates this point.

The award winning We Like Kids, is produced by Jeff Brown at KTOO-FM in Juneau, Alaska and is broadcast in many other states over the National Public Radio satellite system. The program uses a half-hour format and includes music and stories for kids of various ages. Parents are encouraged to also listen and to participate with their children. The programs tend to emphasize a particular theme. For example, black history, trains, letters and words, and getting along, are some themes which have recently been used. The shows move quickly and are well paced for a contemporary audience. A regular news letter sent to listeners provides brief articles, drawings, and listings of program topics, music, and related resources.

Another award winning weekly radio program is Pickleberry Pie. This program is similar in format to We Like Kids. Each program focus on topics of special concern to children. Stories and music are used to communicate ideas as well as entertain. The show features a set of characters, the Pickleberries (Peter, Pammy, and Tony) who find themselves investigating all types of issues. Frequently the show welcomes local children to the studio who explore their ideas and feelings with the Pickleberry characters. This program is produced by P.J. Swift and is provided nation wide by the NPR-EPS satellite.

A third program is Knock On Wood , which is written and produced by Steve Charney and originates from WAMC-FM, Albany, New York. Charney uses a dummy, Harry, in a ventriloquism comedy act on radio! The many voices of Charney are explored as he and Harry carry on conversations between themselves and visiting characters. This program concept works well, and the shows are full of good humor with visiting authors and musicians frequently coming in to perform their stories, poetry, and music.

These three programs are typical of the many other programs which are designed and broadcast for children around the country. They are meant to entertain and educate, and by the response of children they do just that.

Satellite Delivery and Digital Cable

Regional radio stations can re-broadcast specialized programs sent down from satellites. An example is the Children's Satellite Network, a Minneapolis-based syndicate which grew out of the popular Radio AAHS (WWTC-AM), a station dedicated to children's interests. The station has been offering programming for children age 12, and under, for over two years on a 24 hour per day schedule. It can now be heard in seven cities around the nation.

The CSN programming focuses on a basic commitment to educating children while also providing entertainment. The typical day starts off with The All American Alarm Clock which includes a rich mixture of contests, music, quizzes, weather and traffic reports. Great Music for Great Kids is a program which introduces kids to good music and stresses good thoughts

about themselves. Other programming includes storytelling, a variety of music from lullabies to rock, brain games, trivia quizzes with call-ins, and educational offerings. Local stations may supplement satellite material with special regional programs of interest to kids. The goal is to get kids to think and to use their imaginations.

Just as television comes into the home via cable, so now does radio. An example is Digital Cable Radio (DCR) located in Hatboro, Pennsylvania. DCR's channel 29 is "For Kids Only". The Pickleberry Pie program, mentioned previously, is also broadcast on this cable network. Other programming for children is provided 24 hours a day and includes stories and tales from other producers such as Rabbit Ears, Disney, Sesame Street and Light Years. Content, according to recent promotional information, ranges from fairy tales to legends and biographies.

Kids Producing Radio

Frequently, the producers of children's radio will provide outreach activities to the public schools. Steve Charney visits schools and brings his dummy, Harry, with him to talk about topics of concern to children. He has special presentations focusing on literacy, environment, dental health, drug prevention, and even a workshop on radio comedy in which children learn about writing and producing their own scripts in the classroom.

The production of radio by children, for children, has captured the imagination of many professionals in the field. Tina Hubbs, of KOPN's New Generation Radio in Columbia, Missouri, has created a number of opportunities for kids to experience sound production. Inside Radio is a series of workshops for children of school age. The kids learn how to write audio dramas, produce news features, as well as other types of programs which are then aired on KOPN. The emphasis is on hands-on activities where the kids learn by doing.

A recent New Generation Radio Conference brought together radio producers, educators, and others, to work with children in scripting, use of sound effects, and music. A conference goal was to help adults learn how to work with children in the design and development of audio material. The final event was an actual live radio theater performance of the children's original productions.

Jacqueline Loucks, Children's Producer at KPBS - AM in Portland, Oregon, has an active school program for teaching children about radio production. To encourage the whole-language concept, students originate plays, music, poetry, and short stories for broadcast throughout the year.

Like Steve Charney, Jacqueline has special workshops that are taken into the classroom. One workshop, The Sound Experience, provides students (K-5) with the opportunity to create a story with sound. Class members become sound effect specialists for a story that is taped and then played back for discussion.

Another workshop, Sound and the Imagination is designed for grades 3 and up. This includes actual writing with dialogue, effects, and music. Some of the students who participate in this workshop go on to enter the Young People's Radio Festival held each year. Participants enter a 15 minute production tape for possible airing on KBPS. The tapes are to be written and produced by students and can include any radio format such as documentary, dramatic, informational, and experimental. Judges are interested in the imaginative and creative use of audio.

Ken Loge, at the University of Oregon's College of Education, teaches a course in sound design as part of the Summer Enrichment Program for middle school children. He is an

enthusiastic supporter of letting children explore sound as a personal medium of communication. Loge notes that when children work with video, they do so with preconceived ideas of what a finished product should look like, given their extensive experience with commercial television. Children often feel disappointed when their own videos don't hold up to the standards of their viewing experiences. Audio, Loge says, is a new medium for most kids and they are enthralled with the illusions and imagery they can create through sound.

Summary

Although radio for children occupies only a small fraction of the national radio market, it is alive and on the air. According to the television news magazine, Entertainment Tonight, children's music, alone, is a nine billion dollar business and growing. Much of that music is being aired on children's programs.

New technologies for the delivery of recorded material are opening new opportunities for those who want to produce for children. Material on tape cassette and compact disc is becoming popular. Satellite and digital radio provides selectivity. And computers with CD-ROM will open an age of interactive audio.

The greatest influence that radio and audio recordings may have, is to enrich a child's imagination and to facilitate his/her development of effective listening skills. Tina Hubbs has described radio as the modern equivalent of the tribal campfire where children can sit, listen, and be transported anywhere, anytime, and any place, within the creative imagination of the mind.

Further Information:

Children's Radio Productions
Jamie T. Deming, Producer
Northern Blvd.
East Norwich, New York, 11732

Imagination Parade
Paul Butler, Producer
WFDU Radio
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KBPS-AM
Jacqueline, Loucks, Childrens Radio Producer
Portland Public Schools
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Knock On Wood
Steve Charney, Producer
WAMC Public Radio
318 Central Avenue
Albany, New York 12206-2522

New Generation Radio
Tina Hubbs, Producer
KOPN-/New Wave Corp.

915 East Broadway
Columbia, MO 65201

Pickleberry Pie
P.J. Swift, Producer
305 Dickens Way
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We Like Kids
Jeff Brown, Producer
KTOO-FM
224 4th Street
Juneau, Alaska 99801

Additional Readings:

McKenna, Linda M. "The Relationship Between Attributes of A Children's Radio Program and its Appeal to Listeners". Educational Technology Research and Development, 1993, 41, 17-28.

Gibbons, Jane., Anderson, Daniel R., Robin, Smith., Field, Diane E., & Fischer, Catherine. " Young Children's Recall and Reconstruction of Audio and Audiovisual Narratives". Child Development, 1986, 57, 1014-1023.
