

Digital Evangelism Conference 2020

Podcasting: Kh. Frederica Mathewes-Green

I started doing a regular podcast in 2006, when AFR was really getting off the ground. Before the world of podcasts had really begun, I was writing a syndicated column and columns for magazines, I did a monthly TV commentary, and a commentary on NPR about once a month. That prepared me, in some ways, for podcasting.

Along the way I learned some helpful hints about communicating via sound rather than text. For example, to keep statistics to a minimum; people can't take them in quickly. Keep numbers, like dates, to a minimum. Think about how to cast a thought so it is easy to grasp, even for someone listening while stuck in traffic. When things get complicated, talk a little slower. Don't be afraid of repeating yourself; aural learning requires repetition. Frame your sentences so you get the solid bits (eg, facts) in first and add on the decoration (adjectives, qualifiers) later. Simplify the way you express ideas; someone who's listening can't reread the previous paragraph.

At AFR I hit the ground running with a new podcast every week, but eventually cut back to twice a month. Eventually, I found it efficient to pull together a long list on topics, and then dedicated a day or so to recording all of them, so I was set for months ahead. I think there must be hundreds of them in the AFR archives. I've taken a break for awhile, but hope to get re-started.

Here are four things to consider, as you begin to podcast:

1. Someone told me: "Don't be a generalist, be a specialist."

He said that people who try to cover a wide range of topics can't get a foothold. He advised me to stake out my specific turf, and stick to it.

However, I managed to remain a generalist, and it worked out OK. I was able to write movie reviews, opinion columns, humor, reported events, interviewed people. I enjoyed having a wide range.

So figure out what the center of your garden plot *is*. Where are the borders? What's material, and what isn't?

Can you be "all things to all people," and still be yourself?

2. Advice I read: "A book is a tomato."

It meant that you have to follow up a book with another book right away; that when a book is a year old, people think of it as a tomato that has passed its prime. So, the advice went, you should basically repeat the same material in different words, and keep a flow of books constantly coming out.

This would apply to a podcast as well, a rule that you must keep repeating whatever your favorite point is, because people will drift away. It echoes what I was taught when I got media training, for being interviewed on TV, that I had to know what my talking points were and keep repeating them no matter what anyone else on the show said.

I never thought that was great advice, because I think your audience can hear insincerity. They can hear if you're becoming bored with repeating the same thing. I think being genuine beats everything else. So a good rule of thumb, when you want to record a podcast, is "What's interesting right now?" What's got your attention, what do you want to explore further? If it sparks your interest, that will come across in your voice. When people describe their favorite teacher, it's always the teacher that was interested in her own topic; what made her attractive was her genuine enthusiasm for what she was talking about. People want to draw near a fire. Stay curious; stay interested.

3. Where do you get your ideas? Two helpful folders.

Journalists have always used the concept of a “tickler file,” a place where you can jot down ideas you might want to pursue one day. This could be a folder on your desktop, or a hard-copy folder; I like the latter because I can snip articles or jot down ideas and stick them in the folder to be thought about later. It’s easier to sort actual paper, because you can stick it in different piles and decide what you want to tackle next.

It’s also helpful to have 12 folders, each labeled for a month. Ideas that relate to particular seasons can go in the associated month. Like, if its October and you have a great idea to talk about during Cheesefare Week, you can jot it down and stick it in the February folder. Actually, once you have these folders you’ll find them useful in a lot of ways.

4. Express yourself, or communicate?

Think about this: do you want to podcast in order to express yourself, or to communicate? What’s your actual motivation? Is there something that you strongly want to get across to other people? Or do you just want an opportunity to broadcast your ideas?

I am more intrigued by the communicators, obviously. But a “proclaimer” can be interesting when he is an artist; that is, when he can express his message in such fascinating terms that it doesn’t really matter that he isn’t interested in connecting with his audience. Most of us, however, should presume that we need to communicate and make a bond with our listeners. Don’t assume that they will find it interesting to hear you merely set forth your ideas.

In the same vein, that’s why it’s necessary to pay attention to criticism. Some of it comes from fools and blowhards, but some comes from thoughtful people who could have been won over if you’d done one thing a little differently. If you’re trying to communicate and not just express yourself, then it’s a big help to learn where the communication is not happening as you’d hoped. Listen to your audience, and listen to your editor or producer.

Above all, you need to have a servant heart. Pray and keep praying about what God is calling you to do, and discern where he wants to use you. You need a strong inner core, sense of connection w God.

5. Nuts & Bolts

When I started I had no idea what I was doing, but AFR made it easy for me. They sent me a hand-held digital recorder that I love, a Zoom H2, which is compact and lightweight, and very versatile; it can record in mono or stereo, out the front or back or both, with radio-quality audio. There are lots of ways to edit the settings to suit your circumstances. It records the audio on a MicroSD card; you can connect the H2 to your computer by USB cable and transfer the file that way, or eject the card and insert it into a SD card port.

An advantage to the H2 is that it's uni-directional; it zeroes in on the current conversation and ignores (as much as possible) surrounding noises. I was interviewing a tall monk during coffee hour, and it was so crowded and noisy I could barely hear his answers to my questions. But when I played it back later, he came through clearly. Hooray for the H2!

You can screw a little plastic stick-handle into the bottom, to give you a better grip on it in a situation like that; or you can buy a small bendy-legs tripod to stand it up on a desk or table to record a conversation (or just yourself). The one drawback to the H2 is that it burns through batteries quickly, even when it's turned off. I always take the batteries out, and travel with an extra set, just in case.

I have a desk microphone too, a Behringer C-1U, which connects to my PC by USB. I bought it for recording audiobooks, but when I'm recording a podcast at my desk, I'm more likely to use it than the H2—it's just slightly quicker to set up. Connect the USB cable, open the audio software (more below), and you're ready to record.

You will need a stand for the mic, too (these are cheap); also, consider a suspension "spider holder," that absorbs shocks. Be careful of knocks and bumps on the desk, which the mic will pick up. If you pop your P's, like I do, you need a pop filter and / or a windscreen.

If you want to record events where you're speaking (eg, a sermon or speaking event), you will want a lavalier mic (clip it to your jacket) or an over-the-ear mic (a wire hooks over your ear). I don't have either, so I'm uninformed about products. It seems like, at most speaking events, they already plan to record it, so I just ask them afterwards to send me the recording.

Once your podcast is recorded, how do you edit it? That's easy—use Audacity. This is open-source software, and it's free; just download it and go.

(Now, you may not need to edit your own podcast recording; perhaps the host of your podcast expects to do the editing themselves. In which case, you can skip this next part.)

The challenge with audio is that you can't edit a *sound*—you have to convert it into a visual image, a “waveform.” That's the familiar jagged bar that runs along a timeline.

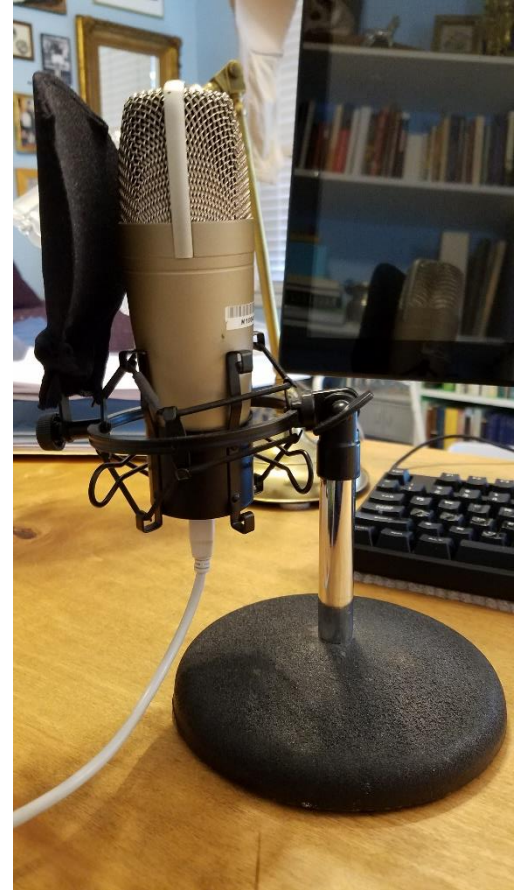
Open Audacity, browse for your audio file, and it will open up as a waveform. Once you have that in front of you, you can edit it like a document: you can highlight, delete, cut and paste, whatever you need to do. If you need something fancy (eg, how do I fade out?), google it with the word “audacity” in the search, and you will find plenty of help. Open source software is an ongoing collaborative project, and people are always adding new capabilities to Audacity.

I like wearing earphones for editing; I don't use them otherwise. But headphones are vital when editing, because they dramatically improve your ability to hear every bit of the sound. Mine are Behringer HPS5000 headphones. (If you won't be doing your own editing, you won't need headphones, though of course you might want them for other things.)

Sources:

Zoom H2 recorder (below on left):

https://www.bhphotovideo.com/c/product/811053-REG/Zoom_ZH2N_H2n_Handy_Recorder_Portable.html



Behringer C-1U desk mic (above on right):

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Stand: https://www.amazon.com/InnoGear-Upgraded-Adjustable-Microphone-Snowball/dp/B07F82BPLV/ref=sr_1_5?gclid=Cj0KCQjwoqDtBRD-

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Windscreen:

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Behringer HPS5000 headphones: https://www.amazon.com/Behringer-HPS5000-Closed-Type-High-Performance-Headphones/dp/B000CCIVDO/ref=asc_df_B000CCIVDO/?tag=hyprod-20&linkCode=df0&hvadid=309791895009&hvpos=1o3&hvnetw=g&hvrand=984402026575510691&hvpone=&hvptwo=&hvqmt=&hvdev=c&hvdvcmdl=&hvlocint=&hvlocphy=1026032&hvtargid=aud-

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Audacity: <https://www.audacityteam.org/download/>

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I managed to remain a generalist, and it worked out OK.
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“Can you be all things to all people, and still be yourself?”

+ “A book is a tomato.”

I disagree, you should always be seeking new material.
Your favorite teacher.

Curiosity. Rowhouses, “That is exactly like you.”

Ideas, Months, Freelance folder

+ Are you a proclaimer or a persuader?

Do you write to express yourself, or to communicate?

Servant heart—fit into the niche where God wants to use you.
(Listen to criticism, and your editor.)

You need a strong inner core, sense of connection w God.

Bio: I write and speak on a wide range of topics. In recent years I've concentrated on ancient Christian spirituality and the Eastern Orthodox faith, but the hundreds of posts and essays in the [Archive](#) include movie reviews, humor, marriage and family, the pro-life cause, cultural issues, and more. Entries can be browsed by [date or category](#), or you can use the search box to the right here.

This is where you'll find my published [Books](#).

I travel to Speaking Engagements all year round; you can [contact Cynthia Damaskos](#) of the [Orthodox Speakers Bureau](#) if you'd like to bring me to an event. This [Calendar](#) will let you know when I'm in your neighborhood.

Audio: Here's where you'll find many of my commentaries for [National Public Radio \(NPR\)](#), though others have been filed away under many different creative misspellings of my name. I recorded a podcast for [Ancient Faith Radio](#) from 2007-2012.

Video: For Beliefnet.com, I recorded brief videos on my [conversion to Christ](#), the [Christ of Sinai](#) icon, the [spiritual discipline of fasting](#), and [the evil one](#).

There's a link above where you can sign up for my mailing list, and you can find me on [Facebook](#) too.