

Podcasts

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INTRODUCTION

“The Voice of the People,” “Democratization of the Media,” and “Radio on Demand,” are some of the titles podcasting has earned since emerging on the public technology scene in 2004. The original podcast movement started with Adam Curry, a former host on cable television’s MYV, and much of the movement was focused on music. Podcasts enabled people to be “instant disc jockeys” and create their own radio shows, albeit Web-based, RSSfeed, and mobile.

As one podcaster, Rob Walch of Podcast411, who has been in this field since early on, describes it, “What was just a handful of *audiobloggers* on Labor Day of 2004 turned into a group of a few hundred *podcasters* by New Year’s eve 2004” (personal communication, June 7, 2006). Now we know that over 5 million people have downloaded a podcast listening program (podcatcher) as of Spring 2006.

Furthermore, just as far as the usage of the word “podcast,” Walch shares, “In the beginning a Google search for the term *podcast* would have given you less than 30 results... By May 2005, a search in Google for *podcast* yielded over 10 million results” (personal communication, June 7, 2006).

What increased in podcasting content during this time was first “talk show” programming. Much of that content was casual and “adult-oriented,” some of it worked toward being professional incorporating elements of radio broadcasting such as background music and formally structured segments. Emergent streams of podcasting are what the podcasting field terms “micro-niched,” which includes educational, specific business markets, and inspirational content.

“Democratization of the Media” is the theme that basically refers to the fact that “big corporations” do not own the “air waves” (sic) of podcasting. In podcasting, a \$10 microphone, free or inexpensive software, and Internet space can make anybody a DJ or talk show

host. There is no FCC control of podcasting, at least as of this writing in 2007, and the chosen topic, as much bandwidth as is affordable to pay the Internet host for (limited if for free accounts), and time are the only constraints. After all, because the services of a broadcast station or sponsors are not needed, podcasters *do not require* the assurance of listeners. However, in reality, most podcasters would seem to want to have listeners; that is why they are sharing their views through this media.

A primary document of this perspective can be seen in the self-described mission of Odeo.com, a podcasting directory and feedreader (Odeo, 2006). Notice the grassroots development and success of the principles in the company. The missionary commitment and zeal to the values of democratization of the media, founding values of the podcasting movement, are evident in the following excerpt:

Odeo is a small company based in South Park, San Francisco, California.

We were founded in December, 2004 by Noah Glass and Evan Williams. Noah had been helping individuals publish audio to the Web for over 2 years with his company, ListenLab, which provided a service called AudBlog (now part of Odeo). Evan was most recently with Google, where he ran their personal publishing service, Blogger, which he cofounded in 1999 and sold to Google in early 2003....

As a company, we believe strongly in the democratization of media. We think that giving more people powerful tools for the creation and distribution of media will result in more knowledge, ideas, art, truth, and amusement available to all. This, we see, is one of the most important roles (if not the most important) that the Internet is playing in society today.

And we think that the potential for new forms of audio content is particularly exciting, as it is one of the most ubiquitous mediums possible, yet also one that has lacked options for so long. See <http://www.odeo.com/about>.

Today, a tour of some of the major podcast directories of current content reveals the breadth and variability of both topics and broadcasting expertise. In December 2007, these directories include iTunes, Zune.net, Podcast Alley, Podcastpickle.com (<http://www.podcastpickle.com/>), and about 100 others. From politics to tech talk, dating to music, animal talk shows to psychics, and history to class projects, you can find the full spectrum of interests in all varieties of views, expertise, and polish in the world of podcasting.

BACKGROUND

What is a Podcast? The most complete answer is that a podcast is a series of audio files which are stored and available on the Internet, but also published via an RSSfeed which enable the most recent episode of the series to be “pushed” to subscribers. Or, as Geoghegan and Klass (2005, pp. 5-6) describe,

a podcast is audio content available on the Internet that can be automatically delivered to your computer or MP3 player. Strip away all the upcoming potential confusion of feeds, aggregators, subscriptions, and so on, and what's left? Audio on the Web.

So what's the big deal? We've had "Internet radio" on the Web for over a decade....Why is podcasting different? To summarize quickly, podcasting is automatic, it's easy to control by the listener, it's portable, and it's always available.

A dissection of these definitions reveal that the audio series is either a music/and or spoken word MP3 file that is from the same source, organization, podcaster, or as you may think of him or her, “broadcaster.” These files are digitally recorded to be compatible for most current Internet browsers and MP3 programs (such as iTunes, Windows Media Player, Real Player, Music-Match, etc.) and MP3 players such as iPods, Sandisk MP3 players, or any other brands.

Because these files will end up being shared and passed along to many people, they usually have descriptive text tags (ID3 tags) and/or metatags, and image files attached to them before they are uploaded in order for them to be identified at a later time. Once prepared, the files are uploaded to an Internet server.

An RSSfeed has to be created for a podcast. This file is usually named feed.xml and is written in XML

scripting language. The feed can be written in XML code or by feed creating software, or podcasters can use all-in-one Web sites which automate the recording and publishing process. However in order for a podcast to be created, an RSSfeed has to be developed somewhere along the way.

The RSSfeed is rather like a specialized table of contents which starts off with specific identifying information about the associated podcast and then refers to each episode one section or “item” at a time. It is in the “item” section that all the details of the individual podcast resides: the creator’s name, an e-mail address, podcast title, episode title and number, date, description, and any other comments that may have been included, along with the all important “enclosure” information. The “enclosure” information has the audio file’s name, size, location, media type, and publication date and time. More detailed information on creating RSSfeeds by code or automatically can be found many places on the Web, but also in Herrington’s book (2005, p. 222ff)

The RSSfeed is the essential technology that puts the “power” in the audio file. Without this file one would just have a Web cast (an audio file posted on a specific Web site, accessible only by visiting that particular site and downloading or playing the file from there) but with the RSSfeed the podcaster has an audio file that people can sign up for (subscribe) and which is “delivered” to their “RSS readers” whenever it updates or they open the program. This dynamic format is called a “push” technology that sets RSSfeeds and podcasts apart significantly from files which are solely posted on a Web site.

Podcatchers (Herrington, 2005) are specialized “RSS readers” that will index and make it easy for users to search podcasts for topics of interest. At that time they can then electronically subscribe, in most cases at no charge, and the podcatcher will then “check” that podcasts’ RSSfeed frequently to see what the current listing of episodes and programming is. Any new episodes are immediately added to the index for the subscriber and downloaded, ready to be listened to at their convenience. There are no “hide and seek” games involved with the RSSfeeds and podcasts once the user subscribes because the feeds push the podcasts directly to the subscriber’s desktop. Going two steps further, if the user has a portable media device (such as an iPod or other MP3 player) configured with the computer, the podcasts can be synchronized (synched) and downloaded automatically and made mobile.

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