

Chapter 15

Human Behaviors with Podcasts

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ABSTRACT

Podcasts, i.e. digital media files (audio and video) distributed over the Internet, have become particularly popular since the introduction of podcasting in 2004. Podcasts are bringing changes to patterns of media production and consumption, and indeed to the way Internet users communicate. Many podcasts repurpose content, in some cases adding a play-on-demand dimension to broadcast media. But most podcast productions introduce original content on a myriad of subjects. The most widespread uses of podcasts, however, are within education, professional communication, and individual self-expression. Podcasts are normally dealt with in the context of established research disciplines such as media studies, social studies, and educational studies. Schools have yet to develop in the research on podcasts. But it is possible to identify a number of directions and issues within the disciplines where podcasts are having notable impacts.

INTRODUCTION

“Podcast” (iPod[™] + broadcast) was introduced in 2004 as a term describing a digital media file distributed over the internet (Hammersley, 2004). “Vodcast” or “vidcast” are sometimes used to refer specifically to video files. But the term podcast commonly is used for audio as well as video, and the combination of audio and still images. “Podcasting”, i.e. delivering the files, technically

involves a web feed that automatically distributes new files to subscribers of a given product series. Thus, podcasting differs both from *streamed webcasts* (content rendered in real-time as it is being transferred from a server) and from *direct download* (manually selecting and saving a file on your device). However, direct download of media files is a very common practice, and most users will understand the process as accessing podcasts.

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Podcasts may be categorized in a number of ways. Content, genre and format are useful when searching podcast repositories. When considering podcasts as a phenomenon, however, it may be more useful to make a basic distinction between repurposed content and original content. Repurposed podcasts include any production that was originally produced for and distributed in another medium, e.g. audio books, radio and television programs, (analogue) films or sets of images. Original content includes any professional or private audio/video production created for digital distribution on the Internet. Mashing-up (freely combining in a new context) original content represents a grey zone. But since the process results in a derivative product, mash-ups fall into the category of original content.

This entry will introduce repurposing briefly from the point of view of changing patterns in media consumption. Main focus, however, will be on the production of original content. Three characteristic and important areas of use will be discussed: Education, professional communication, and individual self-expression. These three categories are of course not mutually exclusive, but they can be distinguished in terms of primary purpose.

Literature on podcasts and podcasting generally falls into one of four categories. One is the computer science and engineering writings on the technical aspects of podcasting. This technical literature is not discussed in the present entry. A second category consists of guides and handbooks to the new medium, either of a general nature or related to a specific discipline (e.g. business: Geoghegan, 2008; education: Salmon & Edirisinha, 2008; journalism: Bull, 2010). The third category discusses the potentials of podcasting within a particular discipline. The fourth category describes and evaluates actual experiments in implementing podcasts and podcasting in various settings. Given the recent rise of the podcasting

phenomenon, in this fourth category of evaluations there is a general shortage of longitudinal studies. As yet, podcast-research most often deals with projects with a limited duration and scope.

OVERVIEW

Up to 2010, podcasting has been around for just seven years. This is too short a period for a research tradition to develop. Broadly speaking, literature in the first couple of years focused much on the potentials of the new technology. After the middle of the 2000s, there have been many studies reporting on – generally short term – experiments with actual use (e.g. in the field of education, see examples below). Only in the last couple of years research has started considering podcasts in the broader context of media. In general, leading researchers in this area include Richard Berry (2006), Jean Burgess & Joshua Green (2009), Patricia G. Lange (2008), Roy Pea (2006).

So far, the most popular subject in scholarly publications has been the use of podcasts in education. In terms of application, however, audio and video for individual self-expression looms large. This kind of use is representative of the web 2.0 characteristic of “*producing*” (ie. being both creator of and audience for) communication products, and in terms of practices and technologies it may be considered a special case of blogging (writing weblogs). As multimedia communication is becoming increasingly important on the Internet, and print media are losing ground to digital publishing, audio-visual publication is becoming an interesting alternative or supplement to written text. As a subject, audio-visual publication has not yet been studied extensively. But being a potentially important subject for research, this area of use also has been included as the third example in this entry.

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