

Podcasting: The Next Big Thing

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Podcasts offer the TiVo-like advantage of being able to listen to the content at one's own convenience.

Podcasting is one of the newest kids on the media block. In less than a year, it has moved from grassroots revolution to corporate darling. In fact, things are moving so fast that any attempt to write an article such as this is doomed to be somewhat outdated by the time you see it. For example, Apple's release of the new video iPod will likely have an impact on podcasting, but it is too early to know exactly what that impact will be. That may require a subsequent column in this space.

If you haven't heard of podcasting, you haven't been paying attention. Scores of articles have appeared in the local, regional and national press, as well as well as a growing amount of television coverage.



A Brief History

You've heard of The Godfather, but have you heard of The Podfather? This is the playful moniker that has been hung on Adam Curry, the former MTV video jock who is widely credited with sparking and spreading what can only be described as a grassroots media revolution.

What is podcasting? Most simply put, it is a form of internet radio. I like to think of it as TiVo for your radio. More accurately, podcasts are MP3 files that can be found on the web and either listened to directly on your computer in the form of streaming audio or downloaded onto an MP3 player, such as the iPod (hence the name).

Podcasting is an outgrowth of blogging. As long as ten years ago, certain forward-looking bloggers realized they could put audio files on

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their blog sites. However, podcasting, per se, was born when Adam Curry and Dave Weiner (a well-known internet pioneer) extended a scheme known as RSS (Really Simple Syndication) so that people could subscribe to podcasts in the same way that some people subscribe to blogs. This turned out to be a game-changing move of major proportions.

Podcasting, as such, is still less than a year old. However, it is estimated that between 5,000 and 10,000 podcasters are already putting their own internet radio shows up for others to listen to. In terms of content and production value, the quality varies widely. The variety of content, however, is already staggering. Just as websites cater to every conceivable hobby, profession and taste, an increasing proliferation of podcasts cover the gamut from the latest Mac news to the ramblings of truckers on the road to advice for new mothers, and more.

How do you find out about and subscribe to this burgeoning new world of podcasts? One way is to download "podcast aggregator" software. A number of such programs are out there. Due to Adam Curry's evangelism, however, Apple recently added a podcast category to iTunes. You open up iTunes and go to the Music Store, where all podcasts are currently free. There you will find a Podcast category. You will see "cover art" for some of the most popular podcasts. You can simply click on any podcast you see there

that interests you, and then you can click on a "subscribe" button.

Even more recently, Yahoo! has jumped onto the bandwagon, creating its own podcast directory (<http://podcasts.yahoo.com>). Don't think this is just a directory, though. What it really represents is Yahoo's bet that podcasting will be very important to their future.

Podcasting Goes Corporate

In the early days of the web, hobbyists and small entrepreneurs worried about what would happen when the big corporations decided to get on board. Would the web become so dominated by the corporate presence that the little guys would get lost? As it has turned out, the web has room for both the small players and the big players, although it has become very challenging to stand out, with so many new websites coming online every day.

A similar dynamic is playing out in the podcast world. Currently, the bulk of podcasts are produced by "indies," individuals who feel they have something to say or who crave an audience. Up to this point, a big part of the appeal of listening to podcasts is the chance to hear ordinary folks speaking plainly and without censorship — a welcome relief from the bland, repetitive and boring sameness that traditional radio has mostly become.

However, as well-funded corporate entities enter the fray, the "indies" fear getting lost in the crowd. This has already begun to happen, with podcasts put out by traditional media companies dominating the "most popular" categories in directories such as those of iTunes and Yahoo!

Until now, the motivation for creating a podcast was non-monetary. It was a hobby. That situation is quickly changing, however. Podcasting is becoming seen as yet another tool for reaching consumers in a highly targeted way.

At this point, the audiences for individual podcasts are not large enough to command advertising revenue, but this picture will change in the coming months. For example, Adam Curry and his partner, Ron Bloom, recently obtained \$8.5 million dollars from Silicon Valley venture-capital funds. With that money, they have formed a company in San Francisco called Podshow. One of the ideas they are pursuing involves creating a large network of "indie" podcasters such that their combined audiences create a pool of sufficient size to attract advertisers.

Traditional media companies have been among the first corporate entities to explore this new medium. Not surprisingly, they were initially scared by the surge of interest in alternative media, fearful of losing their franchise. Consequently, many

radio stations and newspapers are experimenting with their own podcasts. For example, the San Francisco Chronicle advertised in a recent print edition, "New Podcasts This Week... 'On the Trail of the Zodiac Killer' and 'The Minds Behind 'Dr. Atomic'" (www.sfgate.com/blogs/podcasts).

The ubiquitous Adam Curry has a four-hour block on Sirius satellite radio in which his own Daily Source Code podcast is re-played and in which he also profiles other podcasts. He is determined to expand this four-hour block into at least a whole channel for podcasting. Similarly, San Francisco radio station KYOU (1550 AM) is also devoting a substantial portion of its daily programming to playing podcasts over traditional radio.

Interestingly, National Public Radio has been very aggressive about jumping into podcasting, and a number of their top-rated shows out of Boston, Chicago and Los Angeles are featured in the iTunes directory. NPR is not alone, though. The aggressively for-profit Infinity Radio network already feeds its all-news-and-talk programming to mobile listeners through podcasts. Clear Channel

Podcasting is coming to be seen as yet another tool for reaching consumers in a highly targeted way.

is set to follow with its own live morning shows. Others have either already lined up or are stirring. Reportedly, Sirius Satellite Radio CEO Mel Karmazin has engaged in content-delivery talks with Steve Jobs, his counterpart at Apple Computer.

Political commentators have been quick to get into podcasting. You will find podcast series by both Al Franken and Rush Limbaugh. And it's not just the political pundits who are podcasting. The politicians, themselves, are loath to be left behind. Al Gore, John Edwards and Barak Obama are among the podcasting politicians. Even President Bush's speeches are currently available by podcast. The next presidential election is sure to be rife with podcasts.

Major corporations are not far behind. Just as no corporation today is without its website, the day is not far off when the corporate podcast will be just as common. For example, Hollywood is turning to podcasting as a way of promoting its wares. Did you catch Paris Hilton's series of ten podcasts, designed to promote her film debut?



According to a recent press release, Sprint has teamed up with Real Networks to stream podcasts to cell phones. In another release, GM's OnStar system will be used to communicate via podcasts to GM customers. Motorola teamed up with Apple to bring out the new ROKR phone that, incidentally, can download podcasts from iTunes.

Oracle is among the latest companies to embrace podcasting. Oracle will publish two 10- to 20-minute podcasts daily during its user conference for the ears of the software developers and database administrators who buy its products.

IBM began offering podcasts from the investor section of its website on the use of its technologies in automotive, retail, health care and other industries. Purina, a subsidiary of Nestle S.A., is supplementing its traditional advertising with podcasts published every other week for veterinarians and pet lovers. They include interviews with vets and other experts on animal training, pet surgery, medical insurance and behavioral issues. And the beat goes on.

From Marketing to Market Research

It's clear that marketers will increasingly flock to the podosphere in their pursuit of customers. But what about market research? Will podcasting find a place in the market researcher's toolbox?

Some market research consultants are already using blogs as a way of staying in touch with current and potential clients. A way of relationship marketing, their blogs keep readers informed of their own insights, of emerging cultural trends, new research practices and so on. It's safe to predict that podcasts will be used in this way as well.

Just as webcasting has become a popular way for companies and professional associations to disseminate information and to develop/maintain relationships with their constituencies, so will podcasting. QRCA's Qcasts is a good example of this trend. Podcasts offer the TiVo-like advantage of being able to listen to the content at one's own convenience, with the added

benefit of not requiring visual attention. Consequently, people can listen to a podcast while driving, waiting at the doctor's office or working out at the gym, which is something webcasts can't do. And an increasing number of auto manufacturers such as BMW, Pontiac, Honda and Saturn are including in some of their models a built-in plug for MP3 players.

Like webcasting, podcasting is a one-to-many medium. Therefore, there might be research situations in which it makes sense to present product concepts or stimuli to an audience via podcast.

In many cases, podcasts' subscribers represent very distinctive, targeted audiences. Consequently, podcasts may become an important vehicle for recruiting research respondents. For example, there is a podcast for kitesurfing. A researcher working for a manufacturer of kitesurfing products might find it economical to pay the podcaster a small amount to announce that he or she is looking for research participants.

Another potential research angle would be to listen to selected podcasts as a way of tracking trends and market perceptions. Podscope (www.podscope.com) allows you to search all podcasts out there on any spoken word. So, for example, if your client is Pepsi, you can type in the word "Pepsi," and it will search out every podcast in which that word was spoken, give you a link to the podcast and play a few seconds before and after the key word. This means that researchers will very easily be able to tap into the buzz. Similarly, a content analysis of the topics of the leading podcasts might provide insight into the interests of the early adopters of this technology.

Podcasting is likely to be especially effective for tapping into the youth market. Many podcasters are in their teens or early twenties.

The tools for creating podcasts are likely to get simpler and more ubiquitous. Digital recorders are already as small as a pack of

gum. Services exist where you can speak into a telephone and have it automatically recorded and converted into a podcast. Consequently, we can imagine research respondents using podcasting to create ethnographic-style diaries.

Another possible direction would be to deliver audio from groups to clients in MP3 format, or make them downloadable in a secured area of a website. My guess is that ingenious market research consultants will find



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In my podcast interview (episode #12) we discuss extensive use of story and metaphor applications. You will find this episode at www.shrinkrapradio.com/shows. Moreover, in episode #13, a colleague interviews me on Carl Jung's theory of archetypes and their uses in qualitative research. Finally, in Episode #17, you will hear my interview with Dr. Renee Frengut on her pioneering uses of video technology in consumer research. You can either listen to these shows as streaming audio on your computer or download them for later listening on an MP3 player.

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