



Podcasting Power For The People

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Described by enthusiasts as contagious and addictive, podcasting has grown exponentially, as more and more people join the grassroots media movement by launching their own podcasts.

Podcasting fans have praised the new phenomenon for democratizing radio production by providing new voices and more music choices to the public.

"[This is] a whole new marketplace, a land of the free and the home of the smart, the talented and the enterprising," technology expert Doc Searls wrote on his Web log.

Podcasting Power

Though the medium is only six months old, there are 3,075 podcasts worldwide, according to Ipodder.org, a site where people can download free podcasting software. The majority of podcasts focus on technology, ad-libbed comedy episodes as well as random personal observations, which are basically audio versions of text-based blogs.

Fifteen-year-old high school student Win Nadeau recently started podcasting, available on his blog, dailygrindcoffee.blogspot.com. Nadeau wants his podcasts to "offer a look at what is happening through the eyes of a high schooler." Nadeau regularly talks about his many interests that distract him from his homework.

"Music! I just realized it was still playing ... the song that has been playing in the background is called 'Happy Daze' by the Jeep Jazz Project on the album Digital Flavor on the Sonic Frontier. It's a really good album, kind of jazz remix kind of stuff," Nadeau says in one of his self-described "rantings."

Other podcasters steer away from this "audio-blog" format and play music, a more common radio program. The difference is podcasters can feature their friends' or their own songs, and perhaps some favorite local bands -- clearly not the kind of music typically heard on commercial radio.

One podcaster, "Insomnia Radio Podcast: Kill Your FM!" bluntly describes itself as a podcast "showcasing independent music and unsigned acts, untouched by corporate radio."

How does podcasting work?

A podcast is a kind of audio recording that anyone with a computer, Internet connection and software programs can create or listen to. The subjects of these home-spun audio programs run the gamut from political debates and lively movie reviews to Christian music and conversations about new technologies. The quality also ranges from a sophisticated production to a barely audible soliloquy.

The term “podcasting” derives from blending “broadcasting” and “iPod,” even though any MP3 player can be used, not just Apple Computer’s device.

The medium evolved through a collaboration between former MTV VJ Adam Curry and software entrepreneur Dave Winer, among others, over the summer of 2004. That August, Curry launched the first podcasting computer program using a code called “RSS,” or “really simple syndication,” which also applies to text files.

While Internet radio has been around longer, the major innovation of podcasting was simplifying the production and distribution of audio content.

To explain the process simply, an audio file is posted to a Web site, where it can be downloaded to a digital audio player, such as an iPod or any other MP3 player. Then, people subscribe to their favorite podcasts to have those audio shows automatically -- and conveniently -- delivered to their MP3 player or computer as soon as a new audio file is available.

Likened to a TiVo for radio, people can pause, fast-forward and rewind the audio program and, since it isn’t live, people can listen whenever they want. And, unlike traditional radio, individual podcasts are not subject to government regulation, time limits or interrupted by commercials.

Creeping commercialization

The number of listeners/subscribers to podcasts has also grown exponentially. FeedBurner, a site that manages podcasts, registered 13,500 listeners of its podcasts at the beginning of January. Just one month later, that figure jumped to 24,000 listeners.

As podcasts continue to flourish, traditional broadcasters are taking notice. For instance, National Public Radio, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and the British Broadcasting Corporation make some programs available as podcasts.

“As the listeners demand more (radio) programs again, first in the form of podcasts, look for (broadcast radio) stations to start filling their new ‘program formats’ with podcasts,” Searls forecasted on his blog.

Though many in the “podosphere” frown upon commercialization, experts spot many possibilities to make money through this new medium.

For instance, a number of individual podcasters have signed on corporate sponsors to underwrite their shows, says Steve Rubel, a vice president at the public relations firm, CooperKatz & Company, and author of the Micro Persuasion Web log.

Podcasters can attract advertising dollars just by saying -- "and now a word from our sponsors" -- during a particular episode.

But, will podcasters start charging subscription fees? That's not likely to happen any time soon, Rubel said. "The podcaster must have a substantial following and the content must be a very high-quality" in order to demand money from listeners, Rubel said.

Corporations, such as General Motors and Heineken, have also launched their own podcasts as a new way to reach consumers, Rubel said, predicting that more companies would follow suit.

"Podvertising," Rubel says, is a growing trend, as individuals and companies experiment with different ways to gain ad dollars to promote certain brands or products.

This is "not a flash in the pan, it's here to stay."

-- *By Liz Harper, Online NewsHour*

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