



Podcasting

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INTERNET INSIDER

Podcasting: Exploring the Possibilities for Academic Libraries

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ABSTRACT. Podcasting is a recent phenomenon on the Internet, which offers academic libraries an alternative channel for communication with faculty and students. This paper describes podcasting, and offers examples of its use in academic and public libraries. The paper concludes with a description of the University of Texas at Arlington Libraries' experiences in creating a podcast and suggestions for libraries considering podcasting. doi:10.1300/J106v13n03_06 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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After inventing the phonograph, Thomas Edison wrote that the possibilities for it were “so illimitable and the probabilities so numerous that he [the author] . . . is himself in a somewhat chaotic condition of mind” (1878, 527).

The potentials of podcasting can induce the same sensation in modern media consumers. Like other cutting-edge Internet communication tools, podcasting presents new opportunities that librarians are just beginning to explore.

ABOUT PODCASTING

The term podcasting is a combination of the word broadcasting and the name of a popular MP3 player, iPod, by Apple. Podcasts are prerecorded audio files posted on the Internet. Listeners download the programs to their iPods, MP3 players, PDAs, or computers and listen to them whenever they want.

Because podcasting is so new, the meaning and understanding of the term are rapidly evolving. Initially, podcasting referred to an audio file that was automatically delivered directly to the listener’s device using the XML-based file format RSS (Really Simple Syndication) and a feed reader. This means that, rather than the listener having to remember to check for new audio files or to tune in to a broadcast on schedule, the feed reader would automatically check and download any new audio to the listener’s device. Recently, podcasting has become synonymous with any audio (and increasingly video) file that the listener downloads and plays on a digital player. The authors use both meanings of podcasting in this paper.

WHY PODCASTING?

While large organizations like NASA, public radio, and U.S. political parties use podcasting to educate and entertain, the maverick character of the Internet in general makes it relatively easy and cheap for schools or libraries to get their message out without paying high fees to traditional broadcasters. For trend watchers, the obvious growing popularity of MP3

players also strengthens the case for podcasting. A nationwide survey conducted in 2005 by the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that among American adults under age 30 (the age of most undergraduates), almost one in five have iPods or MP3 players (PIP Comments 2005).

In a well-publicized move, Duke University gave the entire freshman class of 2004 iPods as part of a university initiative to encourage creative uses of technology. Students used iPods to listen to podcasts of class lectures and music, to store and transfer files, to record interviews, and to create their own podcasts. Elsewhere, the Vanderbilt Center for Science Outreach created *Snacks 4 the Brain*, a podcast, which connects working scientists with students and teachers in K-12 classrooms worldwide. Many podcasts feature scientists describing research to K-12 students, while others offer professional development opportunities to teachers.

PODCASTING IN LIBRARIES

Academic libraries have also explored podcasting to support both curriculum and bibliographic instruction. Libraries may circulate iPods loaded with instructional files or they may place the files on the web for students to download. For example, Baylor University's Crouch Fine Arts Library (Crouch Fine Arts Library) offers AudioReserve2Go, a program where students may check out iPods loaded with listening assignments organized by professor and by course. At Brigham Young University's Harold B. Lee Library (Harold B. Lee Library), students may check out CD players for a library tour or download the tour as an MP3 file to their own device. Duke Divinity School librarians created audio instructions for their database, *Bibleworks*, and the *ATLA Religion Database* (Duke Divinity School Library).

Public libraries are offering other services that may serve as a model for academic libraries. When the less expensive iPod shuffle was released earlier this year, the South Huntington, NY Public Library promptly began circulating six iPod shuffles loaded with popular audio books. Patrons may also bring their own devices into the library and have available audio books loaded onto them.

In April 2005, the University of Texas at Arlington (UTA) Libraries developed a pilot podcast to gain experience. The lessons learned and the perceived success of the pilot will help the library decide whether to develop and publish library tours, database tutorials, or other instructional content as podcasts.

For the pilot, UTA Libraries produced a segment aimed at academic librarians about the phenomenon of podcasts. There were four broad steps in the development and creation of the pilot. First, a UTA librarian researched the mechanics of developing and distributing a podcast. Next, the librarian researched the pilot's topic and wrote a script. Third, the script was recorded by a library staff member who had professional voice experience. Finally, the finished product was uploaded to Podcast.net and publicized to the library community. Within two weeks of publishing, UTA Libraries' pilot podcast had 113 hits. Statistics for August 2005 record 462 requests for both the pilot and a subsequent UTA podcast.

To hear the pilot, go to Podcast.net <<http://www.podcast.net>> and then type *connections* in the Search box. Click the *connections* associated with the University of Texas at Arlington. Go next to *Not Your Father's Radio* and click the green Play button.

LESSONS LEARNED

Not surprisingly, content creation—the time spent determining a topic, researching the topic, and then producing a script—was the most challenging aspect of developing a podcast. It took over a week to write and record a five minute-broadcast. Furthermore, not all topics adapt well to an audio-only format. When using podcasts for instructional purposes, the authors feel that topics like plagiarism and the differences between primary and secondary sources have potential. Other topics like citation style would be more problematic.

Initial efforts to record the pilot podcast were disappointing. Poor quality microphones did not generate professional-sounding recordings, and software and hardware incompatibilities took time to resolve. UTA Libraries made multiple recording attempts before being satisfied. Another issue was finding a quiet spot in which to record the podcast. In today's busy libraries, quiet spots are hard to come by, but are essential for professional results.

Other lessons from the pilot related to designating a producer for the project and promoting the finished product. A producer will ensure consistency throughout the process while managing staff time and resources. For promotion, adhere to a schedule for publishing new podcasts, so that the audience will anticipate the next one. The authors also recommend keeping statistics on hits for evaluation and promotion purposes.

BACK TO THE FUTURE

In addition to pedagogy, podcasts can be used for advocacy and community building. Libraries can deliver messages to their customers about issues affecting them, such as the Patriot Act or library funding. They can discuss Banned Books Week for students or support One Book, One Community efforts. The possibilities are “illimitable” (Edison 1878).

When Edison imagined the future for the phonograph, he imagined practical enhancements to everyday life: recorded speeches, audio books, and music (532-33). He never dreamed that the phonograph would lead to Hollywood spectacles like *Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith* or to the rock 'n roll revolution and its attendant societal changes (Berg 2005). Podcasting is in the same nascent phase that phonographs were in 1878. By exploring podcasting and expanding its possibilities, librarians can continue being the innovators of the digital future.

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