

Podcasting the Future

Alyssa Fisher

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In 2005, I downloaded my first podcast. It was produced by one of my favorite bands, OK GO, and I thought it would be entertaining, and a nice alternative to listen to at the gym. But after two episodes, I cancelled my subscription: listening to people talk for fifteen minutes was not enjoyable.

Student Caitlin Snyder, 19, uses podcasting to better herself, including French language podcasts, Pilates instructional podcasts, and Photoshop instructional podcasts, though she admits, “I don't really do it. I just watch them” (Snyder). David De Baere, 20, listens to podcasts from his favorite radio station at home, in Belgium, “to keep up with news and music there” (De Baere). Alyssa Servantes, 21, does not listen to podcasts, “because I haven't thought of it really. But I wonder what podcasts are available, and where to find them” (Servantes).

Gordon College's venture into podcasting came from a grant given to the school for the purpose of podcasting, although they are still figuring out how to best use the opportunity. Christian publishing company Zondervan started podcasting certain information as a marketing campaign, and uses it mostly as a crossover tool to increase sales.

Since podcasting started gaining momentum in 2005, both users and producers have been trying to find the best way to utilize it. The most successful users seem to be the average people who buy a microphone and start recording in their homes, and users seem to see podcasting as a great way to get specialized content. Slowly, larger organizations are picking up on the success of the medium, and exploring ways to take advantage of it.

Podcasting: the Prelude

Podcasting has been a curious medium: slow to pick up and its uses are so broad that it is hard to measure how popular podcasting really is. As the technology has grown, so has the technology to measure its success, such as is the case with popular web site meters like FeedBurner and SiteMeter. Those who use podcasting have wide interests and unusual reasons, which seems to fit the medium well as we study more closely just what podcasting is and what its capabilities are.

Podcasting itself tipped, or found its “moment of critical mass, the threshold, the boiling point,” its moment in which it “becomes unstoppable” in 2005, when Apple Computers launched a podcatching client as part of their iTunes application (Gladwell 12). “In just two days iTunes® customers subscribed to more than one million Podcasts from the new iTunes Podcast Directory,” announced a press release from Apple on June 30, 2005 (Neumayer). Before that, podcasting was a faint word in the back of a few minds. In a post on September 28, 2004 entitled “DIY radio with PODcasting,” blogger Doc Searls recorded that a search for “podcast” on google returned just 24 results. The same search performed on March 27, 2008 brought up over 115,000,000 results (Searls, Google). In less than three years, podcasting has become another medium in a growing number that can become a part of every day life.

Podcasting is defined as “creating audio or video content that other download to their computers or portable mp3 players” (Jasmine). In order to listen to a podcast, one needs a podcatcher, or a platform to collect all the podcasts that the listener subscribes to. A popular, and free one, is iTunes. The listener can open the iTunes store and find a large collection of podcasts to subscribe to, all of them free. While podcasting is highlighted for the fact that the podcasts can be transferred to one’s mp3 player, or iPod, that is not necessary for listening. Once the listener finds a podcast that they like, they can simply click a button to subscribe to the podcast, and their podcatcher will connect a feed to the podcast, so that when a new one is released it is automatically brought the listener.

While listening to podcasts is easier, even, than checking Facebook, because one does not even have to go to the producer’s website more than once ever, podcasting is also relatively easy for the producer. To produce the content, all one really needs is a “computer, a microphone, digital recorder...and basic editing software,” as well as an idea (Jasmine). There are free sound recorders and editors available, namely “Audacity, which can be downloaded...and Garage Band, which comes preloaded,” on Mac computers (Jasmine). Once the podcast is ready to be uploaded to the Internet, there are many websites who will host your podcast for a nominal charge. Apple provides a .mac account website for \$99 for one year (Apple). In order to allow listeners to subscribe to a podcast, the producer must sign up with a feed service, which will monitor listeners as well as provide the ability to send one’s podcast to subscribers automatically.

Podcasting: the Present

Many professional podcasts are born out of another medium such as television or radio,

and are often recycled material from that medium. Most shows from National Public Radio, as well as recaps of shows on VH1 or games shown on ESPN are available in podcast form (iTunes). Others, such as Zondervan, create new material that leads back to the original. Mike Prichard, Consumer Engagement Manager of Internet Marketing and Social Networks at Zondervan, explains that their venture into podcasting is “primarily to market and promote our authors and products. Marketing online is critical, and podcasting is one component of our overall Internet marketing strategy to encourage listeners to buy products“ (Prichard).

Zondervan’s most visible podcasting campaign right now is found prominently on their homepage, www.zondervan.com, and features a podcast for The Bible Experience (Zondervan). Of the podcast, Prichard says, “Our Bible Experience daily podcast actually sort of fell into our lap, because we had a radio company produce 235 two minute clips for radio stations to use in 2007. This radio company gave us the clips and permission to use the clips as podcasts as well” (Prichard). This is part of Zondervan’s current focus on podcasting about products that are available elsewhere on iTunes, such as in audiobook form. Prichard goes on to explain that this focus will shift: “we will also be podcasting author interviews for products that may not have an audiobook associated with them. We hope to begin podcasts again on our main Zondervan channel of audio clips from our authors this spring 2008” (Prichard).

The current podcast is not strictly audio clips from the audio and visual production of The Bible, but rather, “a mix of audio book products and author interview or speaking engagements,” offers Prichard (Prichard). While none of this material was developed exclusively for the podcasts, Zondervan is looking into that option. “For example Zonderkidz, our kids publisher division, is looking at doing a podcast where one of their authors reads letters they receive from

kids about the books they write. This would be a weekly podcast we'd publish, with the audio content being specifically for the podcast," says Prichard (Prichard).

When asked what Zondervan's overall goal is for podcasting, Prichard lays out a two-fold method. The first pertains to the customer: "We do want to give listeners good quality audio clips, so that the podcast does provide value in and of itself to a listener" (Prichard). Secondly, Zondervan wants the customer's benefit to come back to the company: "as the podcasts are all free, we need to have a marketing focus to them to encourage people to buy our products after listening to the sampling of a product on the podcast" (Prichard).

The audience that this marketing focus reaches is hard to define because the iTunes platform that Zondervan uses does not provide a way to track site visitors or a subscriber counter, only number of downloads. To ensure affectivity, "we do watch metrics of the podcast subscribers on www.Feedburner.com:" without a growing number of subscribers, this marketing campaign would not be effective (FeedBurner, Prichard).

The key in podcasting is the subscription: once you've found a podcast you like, you may subscribe to it, which means that every time a new one is uploaded, your retrieval service brings it to you. Feedburner is a service provider of media distribution and audience engagement services for blogs and RSS feeds. When one signs up a blog or podcast with Feedburner, they are promised that Feedburner will publicize, optimize and analyze for them (FeedBurner).

Because Feedburner seemed to use a lot of vague terms for fairly complex ideas (how exactly do you plan to publicize my blog or podcast for free?), I decided to register my personal blog with the site. First, I created a username, password, and put in my email. My account was

then created, and I was brought to a homepage, where I typed in the URL of my blog. Once it verified my blog, I picked a feed to work from— I chose RSS, because it was the most familiar to me.

That brought me to a page that claimed to fill me in on “what happens next” (FeedBurner). This was a three-step procedure: the first was “Feedburner will apply some of our most popular services to your new feed to get you started. (You can always modify or remove them later)” (FeedBurner). This still seemed pretty vague to me, so I read on. The second step: “This new feed will be activated in your Feedburner account,” and the third: “You may also set up some optional traffic stats tracking and podcasting services” (FeedBurner). I then picked a “feed title,” which was automatically set to the title of my blog, and a “feed address,” which was a URL where I assumed I would get my feed information (FeedBurner). At this point, I think that if I add “feed” to everything, I’m speaking “feed speak.”

Finally, it is announced that my “feed is ready for the world,” and I am instructed on how to publicize, optimize and analyze (FeedBurner). First I am instructed on how to redirect my feed from Blogger.com to Feedburner.com— I did not even know I had a feed on Blogger. Publicizing options include making a banner that I can place on any website, or making a “SpringWidgets Skin,” that is a platform which “allows your feed content to go anywhere on the web you or others may put a snippet of HTML, such as blogs, MySpace pages, message boards, and more” (FeedBurner).

Optimizing my blog means making it more interactive: giving my readers the option “to tag, email or share their content with others,” while analyzing my feed includes counting the

number of visits, the amount of time spent on my blog, the people who subscribe, how they use the site, and uncommon uses (FeedBurner). I also have the option of exporting all of this information into Excel if I want to.

Overall it seems that FeedBurner has a good idea going here, and it is a fairly simple way for the amateur blogger or podcaster to allow subscribing to their site. However, it seems that there is a lot going on, and could easily take a simple, friendly blog, and attempt to turn it into a machine, concerned with hits, subscriptions, and advertising.

From a user's point of view, because you are downloading the podcast, it is yours to pause, rewind, speed up, and delete. And should you like to respond, you may record your own podcast and upload it, with a little help from some free editing software, and a microphone. From a production point of view, podcasting brings together several trends in media: on-demand listening/watching, self-publishing, and automatic retrieval.

Podcasting the Future

With such innovative technology, I was surprised to find as I researched podcasts that most of the ones found on iTunes' list of top downloads, including five shows regularly broadcast on National Public Radio, and compositions of popular videos on YouTube.com, were not new material (iTunes). I could listen to many recorded radio shows, sermons, even watch TV shows as podcasts. My initial thoughts were echoed when reading about new media: "How did we arrive at a situation in which new digital tools are used not to experiment but to replicate old forms," ask the authors of *New Media Poetics* (Morris 103). Currently, the only popular podcasts that offer new information are educational ones: foreign language aides, or, in the case of the

iTunesU Web site for Gordon College, lectures from actual courses uploaded to supplement the curriculum. With such an accessible medium, why are most users focusing on old information? Mediums such as blogs, television, and radio are broadcasting a new message, and it seems like the next logical step for podcasts would be to find a message that can be communicated originally.

So as a project, and in culmination of four years of studying media and communication, I decided to step into this new medium, and see if I could find something new to say. As I started to contemplate my own addition to podcasting, I participated in several conversations about what might be worth producing. My roommate and I had been discussing our frustration with our culture's lack of listening. We feel like our generation, spends most of our time talking or watching, and our ability to listen has become severely hindered. Specifically, we feel that our culture has stopped storytelling. We thought back to the time before written stories, when Homer's *The Odyssey* was passed down by oral tradition. We pictured communities gathering around to hear stories, and we thought about how rarely that happens now. But how much we would enjoy hearing stories from people in our neighborhood. So my idea was born: I would produce a podcast featuring members of the Gordon community telling a story from their life.

As I shared my idea, a few people stepped forward to participate. I began to research other podcasts that had similar ideas, namely *This I Believe*, produced by National Public Radio, and *This American Life*, produced by Chicago Public Radio (*This I Believe*, *This American Life*). I noticed that editions of *This I Believe* were about four minutes long, and contained only one reading per episode, while *This American Life*, runs about an hour, interviewing and experiencing several stories. Based on my familiarity with listening to a podcast that I felt was

too long, I decided that my podcast would last about five minutes, keeping each podcast to one story.

Ultimately, my goal would be to pitch the podcast to the College as a supplement to their education-heavy iTunesU web site. My plan was to take an admissions point of view in the pitch. The admissions department at Gordon College has hired blog writers who are current students, and I thought this would be a natural extension of this. Having information directly from the students on the iTunesU web site would be a great resource for perspective students and parents.

I ventured over to the college's tech department, and asked for some help with getting this project rolling. My idealistic thoughts of pulling out my Mac in a quiet café to tell stories with a couple of friends were quickly pushed away as Paul Rogati, Multimedia Designer for the Center for Educational Technologies at Gordon College, began speaking about isolating sound, audio mixers, and took me over to the sound studio. With a tutorial on Amadeus II, a sound recording and editing program similar to Audacity, and a few notes on which knobs connect to which mics, Rogati assured me I was ready to record.

Because I want to take a producing role in this project, I asked a friend to do an introduction and conclusion to each episode to give the podcasts continuity. I also had a generic piece of music recorded to give the listener something other than human voice to hear. I spoke to my three storytellers, instructing them to write five-minute stories, but I did not give very much guidance. This worked to my advantage, as the three people I chose developed different stories that served my purpose. One story was a thought provoking anecdote on societal values, another about the discovery of a website filled with stories and photographs from her ancestry, and the third a light-hearted and memorable comic strip. While these stories do not have a similar

structure, which may have been ideal when pitching to a larger web site host, I think it fit my original goal of representing the population of Gordon College.

At this point, I have yet to start recording. But as I continue in this project, I hope to discover the joy of taking part in a relatively new medium. I hope to collect together all of my notes and decisions and helpful readings from throughout the months I have worked on this podcast and put them into a production notebook. I hope to pitch the finished product to Gordon College, and I hope that it is picked up and put on the iTunesU web site. I have a notion that maybe a literary or media production student will continue this podcast as their own, as I leave college and move on to new projects.

Podcasting has grown in just three years into a piece of life. Mostly because of its convenience. Listeners do not have to follow up on their favorite recordings, but merely open up their iTunes and put on their headphones. Listeners do not even have to make sure they are in front of their TVs or radios at the time of their favorite show, but open up their iTunes and put on their headphones. Will this provoke professional producers of podcasts to create new material alongside the unoriginal? Will this create a new set of professional media producers, who specialize in pushing podcasting to new heights, as happened when radio and television were created? It has only been three years. But I see a medium with potential that has yet to be tapped.

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