Chapter 8.1
Podcastia:
Imagining Communities of Pod-People

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ABSTRACT

While podcasting has become a valuable advertising tool for many companies, it has also become a major way in which geographically spread out communities have been able to stay connected. Podcasts, like many other new Internet genres, are thought to be listened to mainly by an affluent audience who create podcast themselves. By looking at the various institutional and production issues and audiences of the podcast medium, this chapter will show how this genre works to create and sustain mass communities of "prosumers" and mobile audiences. Also, this chapter will historically contextualize the podcast by showing ways in which it is not simply a reiteration of earlier technologies, but also a distinct new medium with a unique, prosumer-friendly mode of transmission and reception.

INTRODUCTION

The sudden rise of podcasting on the "new media" scene has stunned, perplexed, and pleasantly surprised a vast majority of techno-savvy producers and consumers. According to the The New Oxford American Dictionary, which named "podcast" the word of the year in 2005 ("Wordsmiths hail," 2005), this term refers to "a digital recording of a radio broadcast or similar program, made available on the Internet for downloading to a personal audio player" ("podcast n," 2005). This is a simplified definition that does not take into account that almost any type of media can be podcasted, including audio, video, or even text. While "radio broadcasts" make up a large proportion of popular podcasts, they are by no means the only possible origins of a recording. While much of the reporting and advertising of podcasting has centered around commercial podcasts like recorded radio programs or newspaper articles, most are still made by amateurs who design them with the podcast as the intended platform. It has been most compared to amateur mediums like the communal ham radio, the subversive pirate radio, and the editorial and journalistic blog, which podcasts are usually formally attached to.

What separates a podcast from Internet radio, another genre of streaming media, which podcasts

are often conflated with, is that a podcast is not live, and it is stored on the user's computer or mp3 player. A podcaster records a show using any of a number of audio programs that can range from simple and free to professional and expensive. They then often use a sound-editing program, like the free Audacity or GarageBand, to edit and clean up their recording. These programs offer extensive Help Menus and excellent podcasting tutorials. The final steps involve getting your sound file online before they put it on their Web site attached to an RSS, or Really Simple Syndication feed. This is a file format that allows for media to be easily syndicated throughout the Web. There are many Web sites that will both turn your file into an RSS feed and upload the file to the Web for you. For example, professors are now beginning to record their lectures and put them on campus Web sites attached to an RSS feed. The RSS feed tells students when new recordings are available and allows them to download them automatically. For instance, Google search for "LectureCast" brings up many Web sites, like the popular www.podcastdirectory, which offer many free podcasts of UNLV lectures.

There are many different ways to create a podcast and finding the way that works best for you is largely based on your knowledge of sound editing and Internet technologies, as well as the type of computer and software you are using. Due to this large range of methods that can be used to achieve your goals, I will not be going into very much detail on the techniques of podcast creation, but luckily there are many great online tutorials that I advise everyone to explore. My favorite is www.how-to-podcast-tutorial.com. This site goes into a great deal of detail on both how to create and improve podcasts, as well as how to promote and think about your content. The Podcasting Tools Web site (http://www.podcasting-tools.com/how-to-podcast.htm) is another site that is particularly good at explaining how to record and

edit audio. Most new audio recording software should also include a help section on podcasting as well. Also, a simple Internet search will bring up many more helpful sites and as this technology is still changing and growing, this is the best way to get up-to-date information on podcasting technology.

For podcast consumers, the process starts with them either scouring the Internet, or a podcast directory for LectureCast. There are many searchable directories online, but the most well known is the one attached to the iTunes Music Store (iTMS), which is part of Apple's iTunes music software. After the professor's podcast has been found, the user must subscribe, or download a link, to LectureCast into a "podcatching" program, like iPodder, or iTunes. This program will keep track of the LectureCast RSS link and download the individual lectures as soon as the professor attaches them to it. Consumers can then listen to them on their computers, or move them to an mp3 player so that they can listen to them on the go.

This mode of reception, which is not dependent on time or space, as most radio and television broadcasts are, has become particularly popular with those living in urban, subway-ridden environments, where radio transmissions are unreliable at best, and also those who have moved away from these cities, or have simply moved around often in general. They are also, like many other new Internet genres, thought to be listened to mainly by those who also produce them. By looking at the various institutional and production issues and audiences of the podcast medium, this chapter will show how this genre works to create and sustain mass communities of mobile audiences and "prosumers," or consumers who also occasionally produce media. This term has long been used by electronics and camera equipment companies, who consider this market segment to be quite profitable.

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