

Chapter LVIII

Podcasting and Really Simple Syndication (RSS)

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ABSTRACT

The simple nature of podcasting and Really Simple Syndication (RSS) belies the power for change embodied in them, either singly or in tandem. On the surface, podcasting is merely the recording of an audio file in MP3 format for sharing on the Internet, an MP3 player or some other device; this chapter covers the history and technical aspects of that process. Podcasting and the RSS feeds that keep consumers of podcasting connected to the source are examined as part of a larger movement in computer mediated collaboration that centers on mobility, immediacy, and interactivity. Podcasting, as a personal tool or an organizationally managed one is examined in terms of types of podcasts, their current applications and future trends that can be anticipated in their use..

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the basic concepts of podcasting and Really Simple Syndication (RSS) and trace the development of these technologies as a significant influence on communication models. Both of these terms have only recently entered the lexicon for educators, trainers, managers, policy makers and other Internet users. Podcasting was recognized as the Word of the Year for 2005 by the editors of the New Oxford American Dictionary (Biema, 2005). The term was defined as “a digital recording of a

radio broadcast or similar program, made available on the Internet for downloading to a personal audio player” (Wikipedia, n.d.).

“Podcasting” in this sense is a frequently heard term that peppers the speech of savvy Internet users. This generic sense was the result of the popularity of Apple Computer’s tiny handheld MP3 player, the iPod. Since its entry into the digital-music player market in 2001, the iPod has caught the attention of a broad audience. Biema (2005) reports that in late 2004, a Google search for “podcast” returned zero results; the same search conducted in 2005 generated a real con-

trast, over 77 million results. Podcasting literally burst into the lexicon of Internet jargon in 2005, evidence of the power of the metaphor as well as the ubiquity of the practice. Biema explains the etymology of the term:

The “pod” in “iPod” suggests Apple’s device is small and compact but chockfull of good contents, like a pea pod. The word “pod” began as “cod” in Old English, meaning “the husk or outer covering of any fruit or seed.” The “pod” spelling isn’t recorded until 1688, according to the Oxford English Dictionary (2005, para 8).

A posting at News for Nerds (Slashdot.org., <http://slashdot.org/>), dated August 12, 2005, reviews *Todd Cochrane’s Podcasting: The Do-It-Yourself Guide*, (<http://books.slashdot.org/article.pl?sid=05/08/12/1650234&from=rss>). The reviewer for Slashdot.org notes that the simplest description of podcasting is someone producing audio files and syndicating them with a RSS feed; listeners use one of the many available applications to download audio files in MP3 format to an MP3 player, which may or may not be an actual Apple iPod. Whether creditable to ingenious marketing or a serendipitous choice of available descriptors, podcasting has become the preferred, synecdochic term for downloading audio files to the entire class of MP3 players, in much the same way that COKE used in some parts of the world to simply mean a carbonated beverage or KLEENEX is used to mean a facial tissue.

A podcast is an audio file in a specific file format, MP3, which is MPEG-1 Audio Layer 3, though it is almost always referred to as MP3. MP3 is a compression format, meaning that the file is compressed to a more manageable (smaller) size. There are other file formats, but MP3 is, at the time of this writing, the most common for the small devices, such as the digital music players (MP3 players). MP3 players, such as the iPod, have become extremely popular mobile devices. MP3 format is available on the Internet so that

it can be listened to on a computer, MP3 player, Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs), and some cell phones.

Since podcasts and other Internet-based communication tools are very dynamic and may change more frequently than traditional print products, many podcast consumers and producers use a companion tool called RSS (Really Simple Syndication), though it is not absolutely necessary to have RSS in order to produce and use podcasts or blogs. There are RSS content-use programs, sometimes called feed readers, to which the user subscribes in order for the user to automatically get notices that there is something new on that blog, Web page or podcast. In essence, the reader to which the user has subscribed regularly reviews the list of subscriptions for that user and, if there is new content, sends a notice to the user. The syndication in Really Simple Syndication (RSS) comes from the Web feed or the subscription service. RSS is really a collection of Web feeds, just as the name suggests.

Web feeds typically deliver Web pages or links to Web pages, sometimes accompanied by a brief summary of what is on that page, depending on the sophistication of the Web feed. For example, a university or company may provide RSS, and interested parties may subscribe. When there is new content on the particular page of the organization’s Web site or its index page, the subscribing party is notified, with a one or two line description of the new content. Users can subscribe to this type of service with CNN, various professional organizations, schools, publications, podcasts, and other Web sites.

Combining podcasting with RSS greatly increases information access, resulting in a more dynamic tool set. Those users who are developing and uploading podcasts to the Internet may want to include RSS as a feature in order to ensure the connection to users is more immediate. In fact, podcasts are often very dynamic, with edits in the content as the situation or information unfolds, since it is easy to produce and publish a podcast,

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