Putting Podcasting into Perspective

Phillip Dearman and Chris Galloway

What is to be made of the podcasting phenomenon? Is it, in the words of the title of a forthcoming book, “pirate radio for the masses”, or is it a fad destined to remain primarily a tool of the technologically literate? This paper suggests that podcasting is a “bypass” technology, allowing individuals to bypass the entire established radio industry in the same way that bloggers functioning as “citizen journalists” can bypass the mainstream print media. Podcasting allows users to establish uncontrolled point-to-point relationships (fulfilling an early promise of radio) in the same way that bloggers can establish direct links with those who post to their sites. But in both cases – podcasting and blogging – there is potential for a “roadblock” as major commercial organizations move in. As they seek to co-opt the technology in aid of their for-profit purposes, they may undermine the “free-of-charge, power-to-the-people” ethos which still surrounds blogging and podcasting as it did in the early days of the Internet. However, the possible assimilation of these tools into corporate promotional strategies may prove to be the key to their making an impact on the masses rather than mainly amongst the technologically aware. By deploying podcasts to support their commercial objectives, relatively resource-rich corporations may move podcasting from its “on the edge”, pseudo-amateur status closer to the centre of the media sphere. This may be exactly what podcasting needs if, like Rowehl, one takes the view that “Podcasting is a cultural and social revolution, not a technical one.”

One-time Chinese premier Chou En Lai was once asked what he thought of the French Revolution. Famously, he replied it was too early to tell. Podcasting is more recent than that particular revolution but, as one observer notes, “we’re in the throes of phase one”. While it may be too early to theorise podcasting in detail, we do not think it is too early to offer some perspectives on what it is now, and what it may eventually become.

Given the hype about podcasting’s potential to “revolutionise the content of traditional radio as well as reshape our listening habits” we might well ask if the tumbrels are already in the streets to remove the kings and queens of radio, as we know it today. The answer is, “no” – at least, we think, not just yet.

However it is still reasonable to ask whether podcasting is indeed an opportunity to bypass existing radio formats, and can therefore truly be called “revolutionary”, or whether its growth will be constrained and co-opted by large corporations seeking to maximise their targeted marketing reach. As we talk about this, we will cover some selected theoretical approaches we think are relevant and helpful for understanding podcasting. We will talk
briefly about a project we are planning, which applies podcasting in teaching, and invite you to speculate with us about other possibilities for what is essentially time and space shifted radio.

**Definitions**

Podcasting can best be defined as audio content delivered via a web-feed. Simply posting audio files on websites is not technically “podcasting”. The practice involves the use of syndication software (RSS) to establish automatic downloads of new files to users who subscribe to a “feed”.

You might well ask, “is podcasting radio?” For us, podcasting is sufficiently radio-like to include it in the same frame. However there are clear differences between broadcasting, and podcasting considered as a kind of audio-blogging. A web-log is an online print diary, very individual in nature, even when it includes content from other sources. Indeed, podcasting can usefully be seen as publishing audio content. Audience members are individually “pulling down” audio texts rather than receiving simultaneously a centrally produced transmission.

Subscribing to podcast feeds is rather like subscribing to news headlines sent via email. New podcasts are automatically downloaded to your listening equipment – whether that’s your iPod, another MP3 player, or a PC (portable devices are not essential) – each time you log on and refresh the software used to collect it. As Phil Leigh points out, the listener functions – via their selections of RSS feeds – in a role analogous to that of the editor of a newspaper, or of a broadcast news organisation. The publishing analogy is underlined by the fact that publishers of paper-based texts are starting to podcast: the online Slate Magazine has started offering podcasts of two or three stories daily, and in an indication of how seriously large organisations are taking podcasting, Slate has secured Daimler Chrysler as a launch sponsor.

There is an underground feel to many podcasts – a cultish, cliquest break-the-boundaries tone reminiscent of the early anarchic days of the Internet. We think that will stay, but increasingly on the edge as the technology becomes mainstream. Already people such as the Podcast Bunker website offer the perplexed guidance in sorting the podcast wheat from the more abundant chaff. So there is already a substantial and growing layer of commentary offering routes through the dense jungle of material being uploaded to the Web.

By definition, podcasts are not listened to live. But what they lose in immediacy they may well gain in intimacy, especially those amateur podcasts made in back rooms, sheds and even cars (the so-called “roadcasting”). The raw naiveté and quirkiness of such programming can be appealing and refreshing to jaded listening ears. Podcasting offers a chance for new voices to be heard and may well surface new talent. If you are in to religion, you can listen to a podcast called Dead White Guys, which features readings from the
Confessions of St Patrick. If music is your thing, you can check out the Plunkthumping podcast,13 which is about the five-string banjo and acoustic guitar. If you like bluegrass music you can listen specifically to the Bluegrass Preservation Society’s podcast14 instead of wading through on-air offerings of less interest to you. If you are interested in science, you can listen to top scientists explaining concepts under the banner of The Naked Scientists,15 who say they seek to strip down science and lay the facts bare. In all cases, the highly personalised listening experience is a key facet of the podcaster’s appeal.

Arguably one of the reasons for the growth in community radio in Australia and elsewhere has been that listeners have tired of the over-formatted, smoothed and often banal radio offerings – chock-full of commercials – crowding the airwaves. Podcasting draws on, and also reflects, the same dissatisfaction with conventional radio. You can, of course, find a measure of diversity on conventional radio, from Gippsland Community Radio where we live to the local Christian station, and so on. But it is not to be found outside its signal coverage area. Podcasting can take the warmth of local, community, interest-focussed radio and offer it worldwide, minus announcements about the cake stall at the neighbourhood centre on Saturday. Or look at it another way. Podcasting is a new form of “access radio” where people of different minorities and interests are able to produce and “publish” programmes in their own language/discourse, addressing their own particular interests and connecting up already existing but geographically dispersed audiences. Clearly it is a phenomenon of the global/local kind.

Another way of using podcasting, which looks towards commercial applications, is what we call “pointcasting”.16 This refers to marketing that targets individuals with products and services meant to satisfy individually stated preferences and needs.17 Podcast listeners have, theoretically, opted-in to receiving the programming because it meets a specific need or interest they have. In this way, says the Washington Post, podcasting is another step towards the “Radio Me” idea, where listeners pick out the music they want to hear and essentially programme their own stations.18

Steve Jobs, CEO of Apple, says podcasting is the next generation of radio.19 Steve wants to sell more iPods (no problem there at the moment) so of course he would say that, wouldn’t he! According to a recent report in the Age, millions of iPods were sold in Australia last year.20 The local MP3 market is forecast to grow two and three-fold over the next year or so. Such forecasts may be indicative only – but at the very least, they are interesting straws in the wind. In the US a survey conducted in February and March found that more than 22 million adults owned iPods or MP3 players and – here is the important bit – nearly a third of them, 29 per cent, listen to podcasts.21 Another study estimates that 32 million adult Americans will buy an iPod in the next twelve months.22 While we cannot safely extrapolate from US figures to suggest the likely size of podcast audiences in Australia, we can at least envisage that they will be a significant proportion of the MP3-enabled population.
Microsoft CEO Bill Gates is on record as saying that mobile phones will ultimately be more important. Of course, he too would say that – but he may be right. There are many millions more mobile phones in use than dedicated MP3 players or PCs, which is why Bill Gates says suitably enabled mobiles will become the MP3 player of choice. According to IDC, in the third quarter of the 2004 financial year, worldwide mobile phone sales topped 164 million, a growth of 23 per cent year on year. One estimate is that worldwide sales of digital music players reached 27.8 million in 2004. Indeed, one of the next “big things” is delivery of streaming content – both audio and video – to mobile phones. This is in the early stages of availability in Europe. It will be facilitated by the introduction of 3G networks and, among other things, may well mean we all spend more on our phone bills! It will be interesting to see how the market responds.

Whatever device becomes the equipment of choice, it is worth remembering that what can be done for audio can be done for video – bringing in the idea of “vodcasting”.

**Why be interested?**

There are at least three reasons why we should be interested in podcasting. Firstly, the diffusion of innovations cycle has been shortened dramatically in this instance. Large organisations, both commercial and non-profit, have moved in within twelve months of the “podfather” Adam Curry integrating the technologies that make podcasting possible. Any technology that takes off this quickly is worth watching. If it is a bubble, will it burst? If not, how high will it go? Some see podcasting as a fad. That is not the view of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s (ABC) Radio National podcasting manager Gordon Taylor, who says some form of the technology is almost certain to be part of the broadcasting environment in years to come. Interestingly, half of those responding to a survey about the ABC Radio’s podcasting trial said they download shows they do not usually listen to on the radio, so perhaps it is no surprise that ABC Radio is expanding its trial after downloads hit over one hundred thousand in one week. With reason, Apple clearly does not see podcasting as a fad. The latest Apple iTunes software includes a directory of more than four thousand free podcast programmes. Apple says it is taking podcasting mainstream by building everything the audience needs to find, subscribe, manage and listen to podcasts into iTunes.

Bear in mind that, as we have already suggested, podcasting is driven partly by a reaction to the sanitised, corporation-programmed music that rules many of our airwaves; and consider that, as some commentator say, podcasting is about “genuine voices” and about narrowcasting to niche audiences. Commercial radio and broadcast organisations wishing to operate in this developing market will need to adapt to it. As Russell Balding (Managing Director of the ABC) said last month, speaking about digital radio, old services simply are not enough to persuade listeners to take up the new technology. It is new content and new approaches, he said, that will persuade listeners to take up the new technology, not the status quo.
The second reason to maintain our attention is that podcasting can reasonably be defined as a bypass technology skirting mainstream radio, in the same way that blogging bypasses traditional print media. However it is important to note that those media are increasingly taking blogging seriously, and attempting to co-opt it by running their own blogs. In the same way, the American radio business is already trying to work out how to co-opt the podcast revolution. Executives at some of the largest radio companies are suggesting that radio stations develop their own podcasts and make them available at no charge to listeners seeking a more varied or obscure selection of tunes. The idea is to ease the pressure that broadcasters now feel to broaden the array of music on over-the-air radio, thereby giving the more choosy listeners what they want without making them wait until the 11pm Sunday Show. The theory is that once listeners get into the habit of downloading inventive podcasts from their local radio station they are more likely to tune in to that station’s broadcast when they are in the ear, or at work. By podcasting, radio stations could give listeners what they already get from their visual media: the ability to time shift a favourite program. This is, on the face of it, an extremely appealing facility.

Remember that podcast listeners have personally selected their audio content. That makes certain podcasts potentially viable advertising vehicles for marketers wanting to reach audiences who value personalisation – the so-called “audience of one”. An example is the Endurance Radio podcast, directed specifically at endurance sportspeople – a valuable way for someone such as Gatorade to reach athletes. As McDonalds’ chief marketer has supposedly said, speaking about the “podomized world”, “In today’s atomized marketing world … mass marketing messages to masses of people via mass media is a mass mistake”.

The commercial world is clearly shadowing the podcast revolution. Individual podcasters can, indeed, now generate revenue from their shows with a new service at PodcastSPOTS.com, which has introduced pay-per-click or pay-per-insert advertising for podcasters. All they need to do is download a free filler utility that surrounds artists’ songs with ads when they are included in a podcast. PodcastSPOTS.com allows artists and podcasters to work out other deals, such as songwriters earning money from commercial-free downloads of their songs, and in the process paying the podcaster all or some of the revenue. Note that already almost every blogger can generate ad revenues, however small, by participating in the Google banner advertising programme.

While personalised target marketing is not new – magazine publishers, for example, have experimented with tailored editions of their publications with advertising skewed to identified market segments – it is new for audio. There is one important consideration here from a marketing perspective. Right now, audience metrics are an issue. How do you work out who is listening to your podcast? It is instructive to look at what has happened to blogging, where businesses have developed search engines for blogs (more than thirty) and a monitoring service tracking the best-read blogs. It will be interesting to see if a similar business infrastructure develops around podcasting.
Our third reason for maintaining your attention is that podcasting offers opportunities as well as a threat – and this should be clear from what we have already argued – to the various stakeholders comprising the radio and other cultural industries. It could offer new revenue possibilities both for established radio operators and for marketers chasing better targeted audiences. It may also, indeed, actually help refresh radio. As Adam Curry comments, “Using the theatre of the mind, using sound as art – this is something we’ve forgotten how to do in radio”.\(^{35}\) We all know that at present terrestrial radio stations tend to structure their playlists to offend the least number of people, so that audiences will stay tuned for the next group of commercials. That format has alienated listeners who crave more eclectic and less predictable fare, and podcasting may be a key to drawing at least some of them back into the ambit of existing radio operators. Consider what Forrester Research of the United States says:

Consumers want to listen to what they want, when they want, on the device of their choosing. New formats like online radio and podcasting where downloading content is sent directly to an MP3 player give consumers more programming and ultimate flexibility. If radio and music executives can successfully shift their thinking to embrace new audio delivery methods, both industries will benefit from new revenue streams and increased consumer loyalty over the next several years.\(^{36}\)

According to Forrester, music and radio executives must adopt subscription-based models, on-demand delivery and ad targeting strategies for radio to successfully maximise its new formats. According to industry analyst Phil Leigh, they will need to recognise that in future, media will routinely be time shifted and place shifted and that production itself will be shifted to an ever-larger pool of creators at the edge of the network.\(^{37}\)

Technically, of course, there is no issue for radio stations operating in a digital environment who want to get in to podcasting – for them, producing a podcast would be straightforward and cheap. While some observers are sceptical that listeners would be willing to pay for podcasts of ordinary programming, one US commercial radio station in San Francisco is already charging listeners five US dollars a month to download its top-rated morning show.\(^{38}\)

**Developing a theoretical approach**

It is worth thinking about the fact that, as Sawhney and Lee note, the breakthroughs which shatter our conceptual blinders come from the activities of fringe groups fuelled by the thrill of experimentation rather than by the prospect of commercial gain.\(^{39}\) They point out that historically, while corporations such as RCA, Westinghouse and AT&T – who were interested in point-to-point wireless telegraphy – viewed the scattering of radio waves as a nuisance, amateur radio enthusiasts saw the potential of point-to-multipoint broadcasting. Similarly, they say, the activities of fringe groups were critical in the development of email and Internet broadcasting. Fringe groups like today’s amateur podcasters form what Sawhney and Lee call an “arena of innovation” outside the established institutional framework which facilitates the discovery of new liberties of action. Phil Leigh argues that one of the factors
driving podcasting is the migration of intelligence toward the edge of the network. As computers become ever more powerful an increasingly large number of PC users are able to create multimedia content: “as is often the case, it is the disenfranchised who adopt new techniques to circumvent the limitations of exclusive franchises”.

But how and why can podcasting be seen as the next generation of radio? One explanation relies on adapting an idea known as “information foraging theory” developed initially to help understand how people search for information on websites. It assumes that searchers use “built-in” mechanisms like those that evolved to help animals find food. The theory’s most important concept is “information scent”. Just as animals rely on scents to indicate the chances of finding prey where they are at a particular point and guide them to other promising places, so humans rely on cues in the information environment to get the answers they want. They estimate how much useful information they are likely to get on a given path and compare the effort required with the expected outcome. When the information scent slows – when people stop finding useful additional information and do not expect to find it soon – they move to a different information source.

Based on this idea, we might argue that many consumers/audiences today are engaged in “content foraging”. They are developing a capacity to follow “information scent” to the content they want, whether on their PC or on a mobile phone. It could be anything from ringtones to restaurant details. Podcast listeners can be seen as audiences foraging for audio content that more directly meets their needs. For them, the scent of traditional radio has gone cold and they are on the trail of something potentially more rewarding. As podcast content is available at the touch of a button (e.g. via the latest release of Apple’s iTunes software), the effort cost/benefit ratio is very high. This capacity to choose is the step beyond where radio is today, the next “big thing”.

Another way of looking at this development is to use social learning theory. Albert Bandura argues that most human behaviour is learned observationally through modelling. From observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviours are performed, and on later occasions this information serves as a guide for action. Social learning theory explains human behaviour in terms of continuous reciprocal interaction between cognitive, behavioural, and environmental influences and says that individuals are more likely to adopt a modelled behaviour if it results in outcomes they value. This is one way of thinking about how MP3 player use has multiplied, and podcasting with it. Moving from Walkmans to portable CD players and now to iPods has been driven by social learning as much as by marketing rhetoric: the valuable outcome is not only greater portability but also much, much greater entertainment capacity.

Another approach is to look at the uptake of podcasting (and the phenomenon of digitalisation more broadly) using Raymond Williams’ arguments about the social history of cultural and communications technologies.
driven by a market responding to some kind of essential human need (that is, to “what’s going on out there” in the land of the audience) Williams proposes, in essence, that we look sideways at developments in a range of associated social institutions. He looks at broadcasting as an outcome of a series of technical and social decisions, influenced by political and economic factors in a variety of institutions (in the military, commerce, the press, the family, et cetera), and finds that radio offered a kind of social cement that complemented trends in those institutions. He talks about them in terms of the idea of “mobile privatisation”: “two apparently paradoxical yet deeply connected tendencies of modern urban industrial living: on the one hand mobility, on the other hand the more apparently self-sufficient family home”. Today we talk about mobility, but perhaps in terms of what is essentially a kind of “hyper-mobility”, in comparison to the first half of the twentieth century. We have new forms of mobile capital, advanced forms of travel, cyberspace, new waves of migration, new forms of mobile work, and new forms of social mobility. So, using Williams’ work on social uses, we might see podcasting as not simply an extension of broadcasting – complementing these new modes of mobility – but also as an extension of other forms of representation. We have already used the publishing analogy, but perhaps podcasting can also be seen as something like photography. It provides the user with an enhanced capacity to capture and maintain moments of connection between home, work and other parts of one’s “life world”. For the content producer, on the other hand, it provides opportunities to capture and to aggregate more accurate information about audiences.

Summary and conclusion
So far in this paper we have considered questions of new players, diversity and bypass. We have talked about how the sense of a revolution in the making may well be diluted by the co-optation strategies of the big corporations. Our view is that it is a complex picture not simply of good or bad developments, but rather of different opportunities presenting themselves for exploration.

Like the Internet, the potential for podcasting is limited only by the imagination of those with the interest (and the resource) to exploit it. Let’s pick just one area – that of education. We will be running a trial of podcasting at Monash Gippsland in the first semester next year (2006). We will be following in the steps of major US universities such as Duke and Drexel, which have been early educational users of podcasting. Our aim is to further explore the possibilities of developing further options for interactivity. Observers are suggesting that podcasting can contribute to the learning process in a range of ways including, for example, helping auditory learners, helping non-native English speakers, providing means for more interactivity and meaningful feedback, and providing supplementary content. Could cassette tapes help us do this? Yes, quite a bit. Could they do it in as easily portable/mobile a form, with a comparable content capacity? Self-evidently, not.
We think the low-cost high-benefit ratio is likely to lead to continuing development of podcasting. While amateurs will continue to indulge their desire to podcast on, say, their favourite barbeque recipes or the makeover they are giving the back garden, professionals with an eye to new revenue models will seek to mine its marketing potential. The involvement of major broadcasting organisations in Australia, Canada and Britain gives podcasting credibility even without the recent involvement of major corporations such as Lexus, Heineken and Playboy. No one is suggesting that podvertising to the podience (another part of a somewhat ugly developing vocabulary) is going to replace other forms of promotion. But it may come to sit alongside them as an approach too important to ignore. In any event, as mentioned earlier, with podcasting the adoption bell curve has been scrunched out of recognition, to the point where distinctions between early and later adopters are essentially erased.

Will commercial organisations take over podcasting and marginalise the “blokes in sheds”? That’s certainly possible. If it did happen, would it all be “bad radio”? Not necessarily – it might be just what podcasting needs to move squarely to centre stage. But it is not what has happened yet in the blogosphere: today’s commercial blogs have yet to drown out the blogs posted by individuals. Like their print cousins, podcasters are unconstrained not only in terms of place and time but also in terms of censorship and established ethical standards. The gatekeepers have nothing to keep. Anyone with the requisite skills, equipment and access can now make radio as well as listen to it. Legislators and regulators may ultimately seek to catch podcasting in their net, particularly with copyright and defamation law in mind – but for now, it is open slather.

There is enough evidence, we believe, that podcasting will become an enduring part of the mediasphere. Even if technically it is overtaken by ‘vodcasting’, the relatively cheap entry costs to content creation, syndication and reception are likely to lead to expansion in the number of podcasts and associated businesses available and also to new applications, such as those being tested in education.

So, where to from here? Speaking about podcasters, Adam Curry says “We are taking back the media and returning it to where it belongs, with the people”. While Curry’s revolutionary rhetoric sounds well and good, and while it will be fascinating to see what else “the people” do with the technology, the long-term interest will be in what the corporates do with it. If targeted podvertising works for them, we are likely to see growing podcast professionalism and sophistication – which in itself will help to mainstream the technology. If that happens, the fringe operators will need to find new margins on which to operate. Watch out for the vodcasters.

Monash University (Gippsland)


18 M. Fisher, “Podcasting: A made-to-order change for listeners – and perhaps stations, too”, Washington Post, 10 April 2005, N09. Note that already there is an all-listener submitted content radio station in San Francisco called KYOURadio (www.KYOURadio.com) and hence the phrase “open source radio” has been coined. The station has nearly two thousand podcasts in its “podbank”. While podcast listeners cannot respond interactively as they could (to a degree, at least) with talkback radio, they may be able to post comments on a website or directly to the podcaster by way of email – indeed this is already happening in some cases.
29 Consider, as one example, Charles Wright's Razor blog published by the Age, at http://blogs.theage.com.au/razor
30 M. Fisher, N09.
37 Phil Leigh, 9.


