Podcasting:

Thinking about new opportunities for pedagogy and activism

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In the past couple of years I've noticed many new media forms making a transition from techie-niche practice to mainstream staple. Whereas once I had to explain over and over again what I was researching ("yes, but what *is* a blog?" friends would ask), my colleagues, family and friends are now nonchalant in their understanding and use of blogs, video-sharing tools such as YouTube, and social networks like Facebook. As part of this Web 2.0 family podcasts are often mentioned in the same breath as these popular forms of web-based publishing. And, indeed, 'podcast' (which is a hybrid of 'iPod' and 'broadcast') was included in the New Oxford American Dictionary in 2006. But what is a podcast?

Put simply, podcasts are audio broadcasts distributed via the Internet. Podcasters create digital-media files and upload them to their website where users can listen to them directly from the website or download them to their MP3 player to listen to later on. Podcasts have also become connected with RRS feed technology[1] which allows users to subscribe to a podcast they particularly enjoy, whereby additional instalments are downloaded (to their iTunes or other digital media player application).

Educators have been one group intrigued by the possible uses of this technology. During the academic year 2006-2007 the University of Calgary ran Project iU, a pilot program where four lecturers from different faculties used podcasts to deliver their lectures. One of the four, Dr Dawn Johnston (a lecturer in the faculty of Communications and Culture), taught an Introduction to Communications Studies course using the new technology. Whereas the course traditionally involved two lectures and one tutorial a week, Dr Johnston replaced the lectures with a number of podcasts (distributed weekly), and retained the tutorial period for face-to-face discussion with students. Describing the experience Johnston wrote that she found it "incredibly empowering to realize how easy it was[…] I was shocked to discover that someone as technologically unsophisticated as me could actually create a really professional and polished sounding product fairly easily." I can certainly identify with the assumption that this kind of activity requires a weight of technical know-how and confidence possessed by a tiny minority of well-wired individuals. For my own part I sceptically attended the Podcasting 101 session at the Northern Voice conference[2] in 2008 and found myself surprised to be scribbling in my notebook (I was one of few taking notes in long-hand of course!) that podcasting requires little skill and fairly minimal equipment.

There are some requirements of course – podcasters need to have access to the Internet; a reasonably fast computer; a webspace to upload their podcast to; and a microphone to record the audio. Dr Johnston and her cohort of podcasting professors at the University of Calgary

found that it was worth their while to spend a little extra money for a USB connected microphone and headset in order to achieve best-quality audio (Vaughan et al, 15). Podcasting software is available free for download online and also for purchase. Johnston used Audacity podcasting software[3] which is available free of charge and may be used for PC, Mac, or Linux/Unix machines. The software allows podcasters to record their audio in .mp3 format (no visuals, audio only) and to edit those files fairly easily.

Thus equipped, Johnston found, despite initial concerns about losing the energy of the classroom setting (the eye contact with students, the dynamic of presenting material face-to-face), that she was still able to retain a certain naturalness and flow with the recordings. As the semester went on, she recorded her podcasts in multiple locations: from the deck at her home, in transit at the airport, from her parents' home. And although she enjoyed the flexibility and freedom of being able to "scrap a recording if I didn't like the way I'd explained something, or keep a recording when it went just right" she also found that students often appreciated her efforts all the more when they weren't perfect: "as is always the case with off-the-cuff or notes-based talking, I would make mistakes […] the phone would ring in the background. Or a wasp would chase me around my deck and I'd yelp. Or a lawn mower would start up. I didn't erase those things, and students really appreciated it – they said it felt very "real" and that the recordings made them feel like they were there with me. That's what I was going for."

Logistically, accessing the podcasts was made easier for Johnston's students in that all of the students who took part in the podcast section of the course received iPod Nanos from the University of Calgary. Whereas this incentive/assistance might only be possible for an institution in a wealthy region, making it just as easy for students to access podcasts as it is for them to attend lectures is vital to this kind of program. For students without iPods (or other .mp3 players) and/or personal computers it is important to make sure that they can download, or download *and* listen to, the podcasts using computer terminals in a lab or library building on campus.

Johnston also found that, as with lectures, the presentation style seemed to suit some students more than others "I think the ones it works best for are the "keen" ones – the ones who really took advantage of the fact that they could listen to the podcasts multiple times, that they could listen before tutorials, etc. It worked really well for independent learners. It wasn't great for procrastinators, because they tried to cram everything in the day before the exam, and I think that doing that aurally is even harder than doing it from a book. Like with every teaching style, some people responded incredibly enthusiastically, and took advantage of all the structure had to offer, and some got swallowed up by it." However she did find that one way the podcast really stood out was in the flexibility if offered with regards to timing: "I found that it really liberated me from the kind of artificial time constraints of a lecture session:podcasts didn't have to be precisely 50 minutes – sometimes, they were 30, sometimes, they were 60 – the length of the lecture was dependent upon the material, rather than the time I had to fill."

Jess McCabe, editor of the popular online feminist magazine The F-Word,[4] has also experimented with podcasting. While Johnston's instructional podcasts were a single-voice recording (wildlife and machinery notwithstanding), McCabe took a different approach. The F-Word podcasts take the form of a recorded group discussion, usually with about five participants, and are each over an hour long. To date there are three of these podcasts available for download from the website and a full transcript of the third podcast is also available.[5] McCabe found that organizing a group was more problematic than any technical obstacle and that this, coupled with the time involved in "making, editing, and transcribing the podcasts" has been the reason she hasn't undertaken more of them (Jess McCabe Email Interview, July 14, 2008. All subsequent quotations from McCabe come from this interview). However, despite the extra work involved in co-ordinating a group meeting to record the podcast, McCabe was keen to persist with the format: "I wanted it to be more about us sharing our views, arguing, debating, agreeing and joking, like we would in real life. It's not about us dispensing knowledge from on high – it's our personal reactions to whatever topic we've chosen to discuss. Also, I find that unless you're really skilled at these things, podcasts that have been pre-scripted and pre-prepared are not as fluid as real-time, real-world discussions." As a listener I, just like Dr Johnston's students found with her lectures, found that the raw quality of McCabe's recording made it all the more engaging. Although the group discuss topics that are serious and controversial for many feminists (not least of which is the fascinating discussion of whether a cohesive feminist movement is actually possible) there is plenty of laughter along with the intense discussion. The discussion is exceptionally engaging – when I was listening to it on the train one day, I found myself struggling not to react with chuckles, nods of agreement, and sighs of frustration.

However, although McCabe has found the reaction from F-Word readers to be positive "it helps people connect with us in a different way," the audience of the podcasts has been smaller than that of the written features and articles on the F-Word. This she puts down to the time investment involved in downloading and listening to the podcasts. My own suspicion is that McCabe is right – as a relatively new iPod owner, I've just started to listen to podcasts this year. And, even so, my nonchalance with this technology betrays my privilege in terms of wealth and access. As with many other new media technologies, and as I mentioned in my thoughts on blogging carnivals (Gaden, 2007), the digital divide is important to remember even when it's tempting to get swept away in the waves of optimism and potential. However, there is no doubt that as educators, students, and activists, podcasting offers the opportunity to share information and to open up discussions in multiple contexts. When I asked Jess McCabe why she first started doing podcasts as part of the F-Word she said that it was because she had failed to find many feminist podcasts to listen to herself. I was surprised to find that when I ran some similar searches myself that I, too, came up with relatively little, a result I suspect has more to do with the vastness of the Internet, and my own always-limited knowledge of its navigation. One of the challenges surely faced by podcasters like Jess McCabe, is figuring out how to connect within the podcasting community. And for educators looking to incorporate

these new technologies into our classrooms, that community is likewise a potential inspiration and support as we learn what works and what doesn't with these new media. With this in mind, I will finish with a request: if you have incorporated podcasting into your own activist and/or academic work, then please do share your experiences in the feedback section of this article. Likewise, if you know of any good feminist podcasts then please do share their details.

How-to Resources

'How-to: Podcasting (get podcasts and make your own)' from *Engadget* <http://www.engadget.com/2004/10/05/engadget-podcast-001-10-05-2004-how-to-podcasting-get/>

'How to podcast campus lectures' from *The Chronicle of Higher Education* <http://chronicle.com/free/v53/i21/21a03201.htm >

Geoghegan, M. & Klass, D. (2007). *Podcast Solutions: The Complete Guide to Audio and Video Podcasting*, Second Edition. Apress.

Williams, B. (2007). *Educators Podcast Guide*. Intl Society for Technology.

Notes

[1] For more information on RSS feeds and other technical terms associated with podcasting see podcasting terms: Glossary, *Whatis?com* <http://whatis.techtarget.com/definition/0,,sid9_gci1189222,00.html> (Accessed July 30, 2008).
[2] The Northern Voice conference is an annual conference for bloggers and other new media enthusiasts held in Vancouver, British Columbia since 2005. For more information about the most recent conference see <http://2009.northernvoice.ca/about> (Accessed February 17, 2009).
[3] Audacity <http://audacity.sourceforge.net/> (Accessed, February 18, 2009).
[4] <http://www.thefword.org.uk/>
[5] 'Transcript of podcast available now' the fword <http://www.thefword.org.uk/blog/2008/02/transcript_of_p> (Accessed February 18, 2009).

Works Cited

Johnston, Dawn. Email Interview, July 22nd, 2008.

Vaughan et al. (2007). Project iU, <http://www.ucalgary.ca/podcasts/projectiu/>. Accessed July 31, 2008.