

Bumper crop of podcasts are sprouting up on the Internet

By Bruce A. Love

A recent phenomenon on the Internet is eerily reminiscent of the 50's Sci-Fi classic, "Invasion of the Body Snatchers." In the movie, unsuspecting humans, who have had the misfortune of sleeping next to mysterious organic pods, vanish as the pods morph into clones of their victim. When meeting one of these newly cloned beings, friends and family of the departed humans notice a change, but never suspect that the clone is actually an alien. In the latest craze to hit cyberspace, "podcasts" are sprouting up at an incredible rate, and threaten to challenge, and possibly replace, broadcast radio. These podcasts resemble traditional radio in some ways, but the listeners will discover some significant differences. Many who experience podcasts for the first time will become so captivated by this new medium, that they, too, will want to become podcasters!

"Podcasting" is a term that was coined in 2004. It combines "broadcasting" with the name of Apple Computer's portable audio player - the iPod. Podcasting was not invented by Apple, nor do podcasts require an iPod player or Apple software, but podcasts are frequently transferred from personal computers to MP3-capable portable listening devices - like the iPod. Of course, podcasts can also be accessed directly and enjoyed from personal computers.

Podcasts are typically audio files that are published to websites on the Internet. Much like a newspaper, magazine or television programs, new files, or "feeds" are published on a regular basis. By using a program called an "aggregator," anyone connected to the Web with current equipment can "subscribe" to receive these audio feeds. The term "subscription" may suggest a fee for the service, but most podcasts are free.

The aggregators, such as "Doppler" or "iPodder" also are free. These programs periodically go out on the Internet looking for new issues of the podcasts to which you have subscribed, and automatically add them to the play list of your preferred media player. At that point, podcasts can either be played on the PC, or transferred to a portable MP3 player.

Like websites, podcasts range in subject matter, quality, and relevance. Many podcasts contain music, but some are highly technical dissertations intended for

professionals in various specialized fields. You will also stumble upon podcasts recorded by individuals experimenting with the medium for the first time. All of these can be accessed from any computer connected to the Internet.

Podcasting is still in its infancy, and still a bit awkward to setup and use. No doubt, it will become more user-friendly as industry responds to consumer demands for programs that automate more of the process. The future of this broadcasting medium has great potential for both business and personal use. Any individual or organization with a message will be able to distribute it worldwide in a podcast using both audio and video.

If you are interested in receiving podcasts, there are a few basic requirements and some initial steps to take. First, be aware that your PC should have a broadband connection, and have a Windows XP, or Windows 2000 operating system. You should also be comfortable with downloading, installing and configuring programs on your PC. The basic setup procedure is as follows:

1. Download and install a podcast aggregator such as Doppler (available free at www.dopplerradio.net)
2. If you don't already have it, download and install the latest Windows Media Player (available free at www.microsoft.com/windows/windowsmedia/default.aspx)
3. Configure your aggregator as described in the setup instructions.
4. Using a search engine like Google, search for sites with podcast directories and find podcasts covering topics that interest you (try www.podcast.net).
5. Once you locate a podcast of interest, copy the "RSS," "Podcast," or "XML," icon from the website listing to your podcast aggregator's "New Feed" or "Subscribe To" area.
7. Your computer is now setup to fetch selected podcasts, and you can play them at any time.

Sometime in the near future, I plan to offer detailed instructions for setting up your own podcasting website. Because this can be a tedious and technical process, it probably would not make for a good newspaper column. For this reason, I think it might be more appropriate to record these instructions in a podcast. Stay tuned!

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