

Podcasting Agriculture News

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Abstract

An emerging technology called podcasting has been identified as a new source of Web audio news distribution.

Podcasting derives from the words iPod (Apple Computer's .MP3 audio player) and broadcasting. Audio content, such as news, is compressed into .MP3 audio file format and can be automatically downloaded to a computer by subscribing to a Web site's RSS feed. The audio file can be transferred to a portable .MP3 player for listening at the user's convenience, whether traveling by car, airplane, working out at the gym, etc. The audio files can also be burned onto a CD-ROM and played in an automobile.

With the void of agriculture radio news programming in many rural markets, podcasting can help fill that vacancy with a variety of news and educational programming, targeting both agriculture producers and the general public.

Podcasting is an attractive technology to land-grant institutions with news divisions. The technology can be easily implemented without purchasing expensive transmitters and satellite time. Many institutions already have computers and servers, the only essential tools necessary to begin podcasting.

Texas A&M University Agricultural Communications adopted the technology in October 2004, targeting agricultural producers, general news consumers and news media. Though still a new technology, podcasting has been embraced by the mass media as well, including CNN, The New York Times, Wall Street Journal and other national news organizations.

Key words: Podcasting, radio, agriculture, news.

Introduction

The demise of farm radio in many rural markets across the country has left a void of agriculture news. An emerging technology called podcasting has been identified as a new method of audio news distribution, bypassing traditional radio media outlets without significant investment.

Podcasting derives from the words iPod (Apple Computer's .MP3 audio player) and broadcasting. Audio content, such as news, is compressed into .MP3 audio file format to be downloaded to a computer and transferred to a portable .MP3 player for listening. The audio files can also be burned onto a CD-ROM and played in an automobile.

While downloadable audio files have been available for many years on the Internet, the key component to podcasting is its subscription method via Really Simple Syndication (RSS).

Users who download software capable of subscribing to RSS podcast audio feeds can automatically have .MP3 files downloaded to their computers without having to visit a Web site. When the iPod or .MP3 player is synched to the computer, those new audio files are transferred to the player and ready for listening.

Podcasting can help fill the void of farm radio programming and can target both agriculture producers and the general public. With the content available as an audio file on the Internet, podcasts can be downloaded to an .MP3 player or personal computer and consumed leisurely. Many individuals listen to podcasts while commuting to work, traveling by air, or during gym workouts, walking, etc.

Usage of .MP3 players is growing at an extremely fast rate. Apple Computer Corp. reported sales of 20 million iPods in 2005. News organizations in the Northeast and some Public Radio Stations, including *National Public Radio (NPR)*, now offer audio content via podcasts. *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* have also adopted the technology.

Texas A&M University Agricultural Communications adopted podcasting technology in October of 2004. The main attraction of the technology was the ability to distribute audio news that was portable.

Podcasting is an attractive technology to land-grant institutions with news divisions. It can be easily implemented without purchasing expensive transmitters and satellite time. Many institutions have computers and servers – podcasting’s key distribution components.

Methods/Process

Texas A&M Agricultural Communications produces podcasts for its news site (<http://agnews.tamu.edu>) and a weekly news podcast called Agnews Weekly (<http://agnewsweekly.tamu.edu>).

The audio content is produced using a laptop or desktop computer, a microphone and headphones. Interviews with Extension specialists and Experiment Station scientists are captured using a portable Olympus D330 digital audio recorder. As an alternative, interviews also are captured using an Apple iPod with an external microphone. The produced audio is downloaded to the computer. Free audio editing software, Audacity, is used to edit the interviews and produce the voiceovers for the news reports. The file is compressed into an .MP3 file using Apple’s iTunes software and uploaded to a server.

The program’s contents are coded into a RSS file, which stands for Really Simple Syndication, and placed on a server. RSS is becoming a widely adopted technology. Texas A&M Agricultural Communications first began offering RSS feeds of its news in September 2003 - one of the first land-grant institutions in the United States to make this technology available.

RSS feeds are files that reside on a server and resemble coding much like standard HTML used for Web pages. RSS feeds can include enclosures, which contain code linking to audio/video files on the Web. Those running software programs capable of subscribing to RSS podcast feeds can receive audio files downloaded automatically to the desktop. The software program regularly visits a Web site, checking the RSS feed or file to see if a new audio file has been posted. By using RSS, it no longer requires a user to manually check a Web site daily to see if fresh audio content has been added.

At Texas A&M, individuals can subscribe to the RSS podcast feed and automatically

receive audio news content, which can be synched to .MP3 players. Users can also use a traditional method by downloading the .MP3 file and listening on their desktops or burning the programming to a CD-ROM.

Agnews Weekly is a program that spotlights Texas Cooperative Extension and Texas Agricultural Experiment Station research, educational programs, and current issues. The pilot program can be found at <http://agnewsweekly.tamu.edu>.

Results/Outcomes

As podcasting popularity grew through the end of 2004 and in 2005, a clearing house for Podcast programs was created on the Web at <http://www.ipodder.org>. Texas A&M became the first land-grant institution to be listed under the Agriculture category with its Agnews Weekly program on Nov. 17, 2004 (see <http://www.ipodder.org/directory/4/podcasts/categories/agriculture>). Other sites have been created promoting various podcasts. Those sites listing Agnews Weekly include: www.podcastdirectory.com, www.podcastalley.com, www.digitalpodcast.com, www.podcastingnews.com and others. These sites offer free podcast listings, eliminating the need for investment in advertising and marketing on behalf of Texas A&M Agricultural Communications.

In June 2005, Apple Computer debuted iTunes 4.9 that featured a listing of podcasts as part of its iTunes Music Store. The podcast listings allowed site visitors to subscribe and download free audio content through its music store. Agnews Weekly was included as part of Apple's new feature to its music store - yet another marketing avenue for Texas A&M Agriculture Program news. Apple estimates its iTunes Music Store attracts between 6 million and 30 million visitors. The Agnews Weekly listing (<http://phobos.apple.com/WebObjects/MZStore.woa/wa/viewPodcast?id=73329830>) is a free listing offered by Apple's iTunes Music Store.

Statistics have been recorded for the Agnews Weekly podcast dating to when the project

first began in October 2004. The number of requests and the amount of audio files downloaded have gradually increased each month since the inception of the podcasting project (See Table 1)

Table 1: Agnews Weekly Statistics

Agnews Weekly Podcast	Requests	Gigabytes Downloaded
October 2004	1,620	0.74
November 2004	5,059	1.86
December 2004	10,152	4.25
January 2005	7,827	3.29
February 2005	13,195	4.68
March 2005	16,974	10.84
April 2005	15,703	6.82
May 2005	16,759	7.7
June 2005	21,447	8.07
July 2005	24,021	9.89

The request numbers and gigabytes of audio have also steadily increased. Note the month of July was when Apple Computer Corp. listed the Agnews Weekly podcast as part of their iTunes Music Store directory. The following were the most popular Agnews Weekly podcasts downloaded since the project began:

*Oct. 27, 2004 podcast featuring interview with Jose Pena, Extension economist, discussing Texas pecan harvest (1, 408 requests)

*March 11, 2005 podcast featuring interview with Dr. Parr Rosson, Extension economist, with perspective on recent action by WTO and ruling U.S. Cotton subsidies create unfair trade.

*Nov. 24, 2004 podcast featuring Dr. David Anderson, Extension beef economist, providing commentary on negative case of mad cow disease tested in U.S.

The podcasts have also led to listener feedback. The following is e-mail from listeners:

“Huge fan of the podcast. I’m not sure that I’m similar to the rest of your audience since I work in New York City. I was raised in cattle country in California, so I’m familiar with your topics. I mostly enjoy listening at home or on my iPod in the subway on my way to work.”

“I’m not sure how far away your regular listeners are, but I’m a pretty far piece from

College Station here in Chicago. Been listening to your podcast and have been enjoying it. My father was a professor-farmer in Southern Indiana, so hearing about hay usage, crop planning and ag extension is a lovely tie to my past. Keep up the good work and interesting programming!”

“What neat possibilities this technology could have for us. We found out about Agnews Weekly after visiting our son who is the Web Development Director at CNN.”

"I downloaded the podcast and put on my iPod so my father could listen to it on the way to the deer lease. He is a part-time cattle rancher."

While it’s unclear if podcasting technology will become a standard application on the Internet, it’s predicted that usage will increase over the next five years. The following table illustrates the number of podcast users through 2010:

Table 2: Forecast of U.S. Podcast Users 2005-2010

Year	Predicted Users (in millions)
2005	4.5
2006	11.4
2007	21.7
2008	32.9
2009	44.1
2010	56.8
Source: The Diffusion Group, May 2005	

Discussion/Conclusions

Podcasts can be listened to at any time whenever the user desires. Today, large media companies often control radio station ownership. Typically, programming is distributed via satellite to large groups of stations, therefore reducing the amount of locally generated news. It’s anticipated these large media companies will identify podcasting as a new distribution method in

the future.

Podcasting bypasses traditional media. Instead of Texas A&M Agricultural Communications having to pitch audio news to radio outlets, we send the information directly to our audience via a RSS podcast feed with audio through the Web.

Podcasting opens a new door to target general consumers and agricultural producers with audio news content. Further, this may penetrate younger audiences who are more inclined to use portable .MP3 player devices.