

Spoken Internet to Go: Popularization through Podcasting

Steve McCarty

Osaka Jogakuin College, Japan

World Association for Online Education (WAOE)

<http://waoe.org/steve/>

Diem (2005) provides a useful introduction to podcasting and its applicability to Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). This article starts with a brief historical background on the trends leading to the popularization of podcasting or the sudden prominence of Internet audio. Supporting Web services such as dynamic directories of podcast sites and iTunes are shown to contribute to this popularization. Specific examples are presented: the BlogMatrix podcast hosting site, the podcasting blog "Japancasting," and the "Spoken Libraries" project of the World Association for Online Education. There is also the little-known story that the first school in the world to give iPods to all students was not Duke University but rather Osaka Jogakuin College in Japan, where podcasting is therefore particularly made to order.

Popularization of Online Communication Technologies

The popularization of a suite of technologies arguably occurs when the innovations of programmers capture the imagination of the public, which then pours attention and resources into further innovations. Early iterations of online communication technologies from Arpanet and Telenet to e-mail, bulletin board systems and MOOs were satisfactory to those comfortable with computer technology and abstract text-based communication. But those media represented sensory deprivation and technical obstacles to most of humanity along with economic, educational, cultural and linguistic challenges.

Then in the mid-90s browser technologies popularized the Web, and the fuller sensory experience of images, movement and sounds guaranteed the WWW a global appeal. The marketing success of Windows 95 with Internet Explorer in Japan was such that some men reportedly lined up to buy it without knowing that a computer was also necessary. The basic HTML behind browsers and home page making programs brought programming within reach of educated people willing to try new technologies, but it still represented a barrier for the majority.

Since having a base for self-expression and communication appeals to human nature, the Web presence of individuals vastly expanded at the turn of the millennium with the advent of Weblogs or blogs. Greater ease of publishing individual voices brought a democratized social dimension to the Web. This article aims to show how recent technologies and Web services encouraging podcasts represent a breakthrough into a new phase of popularization and educational potential by the criteria alluded above. Aside from the example of Japancasting introduced later in this article, cf. Kaplan-Leiserson (2005) for a compilation of educational uses for iPods and podcasting.

Podcasting: Why is Internet audio suddenly popular now?

Internet audio and video files, along with audioconferencing and videoconferencing, have been around for many years, but they need to work for individuals around the world without counterproductive waiting for downloads and other difficulties. Although audio can be considered an intermediate stage on the way to video with ubiquitous broadband, audio represents a great leap in sensory input over text. Technical innovations do run up against inherent limitations of human perception and the laws of physics when it comes to issues such as screen size and portability, or safety for individual users and public health. Thus before video becomes practical for mobile devices, and probably long after that, there will still be a large niche for Internet audio.

Podcasting includes Webcasting, where people listen to files through their computers, but podcasting takes the next step of pushing sound files to subscribers with portable MP3 players such as the iPod for listening on the go. This opens up new educational potential in terms of using hitherto unproductive time for learning. Currently a number of trends have converged to popularize podcasting, including easier-to-use technology for recording podcasts and Web services (these two detailed below). Faster connections are resulting in shorter or less prohibitive downloading times for Internet audio. In June 2005 Apple released iTunes 4.9, which acts as a browser of registered podcasts free of charge as well as music in its popular online Music Store based in the U.S. The iPod had already become popular for listening to downloaded music synched from iTunes, plus other functions such as storing digital files and voice recording with a peripheral device. Digital voice recorders are also available in electronics stores in Japan, including ones that save sound files in .mp3 format for recording podcasts on the go. All sorts of applications can therefore be imagined for education as well as entertainment, in the classroom or out, online or offline. With the notion of spoken Internet to go, words like "offline" or "unwired" are taking on more positive connotations in terms of hybrid learning opportunities.

A podcasting site can be by an individual or a group. World Association for Online Education (WAOE) colleagues in different countries, for instance, are collaborating on podcasting by sharing technical tips and choosing the same software solutions for their individual podcasting blogs. If one colleague in a group is advanced enough to record free Internet telephony conversations or conference calls, such as via Skype <http://www.skype.com>, those files can be converted into MP3 format for podcasting. Or away from one's computer in a certain location, if a digital voice recorder saves a speech or interview in WMA format for Media Player, which has Windows and Macintosh versions, there is freeware available to convert WMA files to MP3. WMA files on the Web would be called Webcasting because

people can listen to them at their computers. For podcasting per se they would have to be converted into .mp3 files, though they may become much larger, because iPods and similar portable audio players require the .mp3 format.

A Podcasting Blog Hosting Service

Web-based podcasting software is now approachable to people who can do little more than make home pages or blogs, because it automates RSS and other details for the podcasting blogger, and the only extra hardware needed is a good microphone. An example is BlogMatrix <http://www.blogmatrix.com>, which offers 500 megabytes of storage and use of its Sparks program free for a month, and then it is inexpensive if one elects to continue. Several WAOE colleagues in the U.K., the U.S. and Japan have been able to get started readily with BlogMatrix, including movie presentations along with audio.

The BlogMatrix Sparks program records, saves sound files in MP3, and mixes podcasts, including fields for title, description of the episode (in HTML for links), and tags, which are a user-friendly form of meta-data for classifying and searching podcasts. Among other functions, Sparks also uploads to one's BlogMatrix site. Blog entries need not include sound files, while various file formats can be uploaded such as for Webcasting. One caution with Sparks is that a professional quality microphone is needed to ensure sufficient sound quality for acceptable podcasts.

A number of functions besides podcasts make such a podcasting blog a distinct genre in terms of functionality. After login, BlogMatrix displays data such as the number of hits per day, and shows which episodes were downloaded more, a measure of audience interest. One can update the description in HTML, choose Creative Commons or otherwise claim copyright. Listeners can subscribe to the site's podcasts in a number of ways including clicking on an icon. As compared to a blog site using Blogger, it is easier to include a graphic or photo in the description without risking the template or whole structure of a blog. Another BlogMatrix function allows the podcaster to configure how one's site will display in the Apple iTunes Music Store, including a graphic or photo as a logo (these points are illustrated below).

Web Services for Podcasters

The spoken Internet developing under the rubric of podcasting is enhanced by many Web-sites for podcasters and listeners, with news, technical tips and directories. Some of the leading directories are dynamic, not just annotated links to podcasting blogs. Web directories until recently have tended to display out-of-date or originally submitted descriptions, superseded sites or dead links, whereas podcast directories accept updates conducted by member podcasters or spider their podcast sites. A new podcast can thereby become available at a directory within a few hours and sometimes almost immediately after it is uploaded to one's site. Also unlike traditional Web directories, visitors can click to subscribe or for more details. In some cases the whole description from the site appears in a new Web page including the photo or logo, and some directories also generate a list of all episodes with their descriptions to click on and listen to them individually as Webcasts.

As there is such a variety of Websites serving podcasters and listeners already, two examples will have to suffice here. The Podcasting News directory lets a member pod-

caster select smiles and choose the colors of one's directory entry. See, e.g., its Education category http://www.podcastingnews.com/forum/link_6.htm. Odeo <http://www.odeo.com>, which includes the founder of Blogger who left Google, offers members data on subscribers and downloads by Odeo members, compiles comments, generates Web pages and tags for each show, which the podcaster can edit. Podcasting directories rank sites according to popularity and feature certain ones, in some cases requesting a link to their directory as a precondition. Aside from these limitations, the dynamic directories are generally useful and podcasting is a meritocracy.

Another new type of service to various listeners is audio searching through voice recognition spidering. Yahoo Audio Search beta <http://audio.search.yahoo.com>, although not the first, is bound to have quite an impact in terms of popularization as it attempts to spider all the sound files available on the Web including podcasts. Also today (August 5, 2005) Apple Japan's iTunes Music Store opened and includes free access to the same podcasts and categories as the U.S. online store but with a Japanese language interface. Podcasting as a katakana loanword will be familiar at least to young people in Japan before long.

Spoken Libraries: Made to Order for Educational Organizations

In the World Association for Online Education, Nick Bowskill in the U.K. called for a WAOE Internet Radio project and initiated the WAOE Community Audio Learning Project with BlogMatrix and is collaborating with Kenyan member Asif Daya in the U.S. to include video. Bowskill also composed the learning technology survey for WAOE members to podcast themselves or through interviews recorded via Internet telephony with freeware such as Skype and Audacity. In the Japancasting podcast responding to the survey questions, a student plays the role of interviewer.

The Spoken Libraries Website was created to organize information about WAOE-affiliated spoken Internet projects, including links to four WAOE-affiliated podcasting sites: http://www.waoe.org/president/spoken_libraries/. The "Online" in WAOE (pronounced "wow-ee") never implied fixed wires (cf. McCarty, 2005), and so if the project were dubbed "unwired" or "unplugged," in musical terms, it would carry leisurely connotations of Internet to go.

The idea of Spoken Libraries can have many applications, providing a business opportunity for those willing and able to handle the interviewing, recording, production, hosting or uploading. Presumably many educational and non-profit organizations as well as companies that have sought a written Web presence until now would like to have their educators, key spokespersons or advisory board members interviewed, while most individuals would be delighted to have their voices immortalized on the Web. A popularization of this genre among educational institutions and for constituencies with special needs for spoken input can be predicted.

First College in the World to use iPods in Education

With all the media scrutiny of Duke University's "iPod First Year Experience" (Bugeja, 2005), what has escaped media attention is that a women's college outside of the U.S. was

the first in the world to provide iPods to incoming first year students. One college newspaper did report that the "first-ever iPod giveaway was at Osaka Jogakuin College in Japan, where officials distributed 15-gigabyte iPods to their 210 incoming freshmen last April. The school put its original English audio-learning aids into their students' iPods to help students learn English more efficiently" (Mochizuki, 2004).

That was on April 3, 2004, nearly a half year before Duke. Now in the second year, iPods are integrated into the curriculum and all the students in the junior college division are studying with them. All the students major in English as a Foreign Language (EFL), and one required course in the four-year as well as two-year college is current events, where students need to acquire the latest news stories by synching their iPods with campus computers in order to do homework assignments.

Ambitious goals for students in terms of English proficiency test scores as well as understanding global issues led to introducing iPods to increase student exposure to English and other foreign languages. Besides the time taken by part-time jobs, many students are strap-hanging for about three hours a day to and from the city center; so having lessons to listen to on the go makes better use of their time. With a great many listening materials already in use, the next phase would be to incorporate podcasting by, as well as for, the students and faculty members.

Japancasting: An Example of the Educational Possibilities

A podcasting blog needs a coherent theme in consideration of certain potential listeners. The time for podcasts about podcasting has passed. The site also needs a purpose beyond trying the latest technology just because it is there and one has the requisite skills. There is also no use in transplanting the same content to a new medium, such as by reading previous publications out loud, since they could be read more quickly. Of all the possibilities open to listeners in their limited time, what episodes would make for just-in-time learning or expand their horizons? What contents will give the site recognition or sustainability? Whether it is to reach a different audience that is not so academic or to provide content that benefits from being spoken, in any case a podcasting site that goes public should be suitable to the new media and engage the affordances thereof.

Regarding TEFL in Japan, peer to peer communication including with other colleges could make for a select audience, or personal information privacy concerns could drive such sites into password protection. Japancasting keeps students anonymous without close-up photos, but it is nevertheless exciting for those in the know.

The two stated audiences for Japancasting are those studying Japan or English as a Foreign Language. The episodes broadcast so far go into the fields of Japanese culture and comparative religions, contemporary issues such as the educational system and human rights of minorities in Japan, including foreigners. Ancient legends from the pilgrimage of Shikoku, Noh and bunraku plays are analyzed with discussion questions for listeners abroad to discover East Asian values. Seven students have played roles or have presented their own creation in the podcasts so far. There will be interviews with colleagues and other informants in English and Japanese.

There should be some variety for spice, so the podcasts have included a bilingual haiku recital, a learning technology survey response, and a speech on Japanese education captured with a voice recorder and available in both .wma and .mp3 formats at the podcasting blog. Most of the podcasts include links to scripts, with some photos and illustrations, for reading while listening, and links to online sources for further research. Since the scripts are available and the level of difficulty of the language is controlled in some shows, it can also serve as content-based EFL for students in Japan and elsewhere. Furthermore, there will be broadcasts in Japanese or bilingual, so the site will also serve learners of content-based Japanese as a Foreign Language (JFL). Thus the site provides lessons for college or high school classes along with informal learning for pleasure and contemplation of intercultural issues.

None of the shows are just recitations of written publications from the online library at <http://www.waoe.org/steve/epublist.html>, though some highlights are taken from results of over 25 years researching Asia, Japan and continually improving in Japanese. The aim is not to move the same content to a new medium or to try new technology just because it is not difficult. Japancasting aims to add fuller dimensionality to content suitable for spoken libraries or spoken Internet to go. An example of appealing to the eyes as well as ears of the audience with photos and graphics is the Peace Dialogue among Religions script Web page: http://www.waoe.org/president/podscripts/peace_among_religions.html. Also the Bilingual Haiku Recital is linked to the Bilingual Haiku Scroll Web page with colorful graphics where JFL learners can read the Japanese version of each haiku in kanji characters, its Romanization to see how to pronounce the Chinese characters, and the English version of each haiku: <http://www.waoe.org/steve/haiku.html>.

Within four weeks of opening the Japancasting site, it was accepted or selected by many podcasting directories in categories such as education, international > Japanese, and EFL. It appeared in iTunes about two weeks after being submitted. Podcasters based in most countries including Japan may encounter an obstacle in that the submitter must be an Apple Music Store customer with a credit card payable from a bank in the U.S. or a limited number of Western countries. However, the submitter does not have to be the owner of the podcasting site, so the podcaster without such an account just has to find someone who does to submit the RSS feed, which is typically the podcasting site URL slash index.xml instead of the HTML extension.

As BlogMatrix provides data to the podcaster about the files and how many times they are each accessed, within four weeks the Japancasting site was accelerating in downloads with 1,750 hits a day.

For Webcasting or listening and reading via computer, the Japancasting site is at: <http://stevemc.blogmatrix.com>. For subscriptions such as through iTunes and to synch and listen offline with iPods or other MP3 players, the Podcast Feed URL is: <http://stevemc.blogmatrix.com/index.xml>

Finally, screen shots illustrate some of the techniques and results discussed above.



Figure 1. Through the BlogMatrix Manage function,
Japancasting was configured for iTunes



Figure 2. Click on Browse, select Podcast genre
or Search keywords to find a podcast



Figure 3. The Education Podcast Network <http://epnweb.org> directory pulls the description from the Japancasting site, which was achieved with the following HTML using BlogMatrix.

In this workaround, the actual location or URL of the photo file can be anywhere on the Web: [Text ...] online library of publications. <p> <center></center>

Feel free to use this kind of code also with regular blog entries to make links and display graphics or photos.

References

- Bugeja, M. (2005, March 20). The medium is the moral. *Inside Higher Ed*. Retrieved July 26, 2005, from <http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2005/05/20/tech>
- Diem (2005). Podcasting: A new way to reach students. *The Language Teacher*, 29 (8), 45-46.
- Kaplan-Leiserson, E. (2005, June). Trend: Podcasting in academic and corporate learning. *Learning Circuits*. Retrieved July 26, 2005, from http://www.learningcircuits.org/2005/jun2005/0506_trends
- McCarty, S. (2005). Cultural, disciplinary and temporal contexts of e-Learning and English as a Foreign Language. *eLearn Magazine: Research Papers*, April 2005. Retrieved August 5, 2005, from <http://www.elearnmag.org/subpage.cfm?section=research&article=4-1>
- Mochizuki, T. (2004, November 2). Apple's iPod is taking campuses by storm. *The Nevada Sagebrush*. Retrieved July 26, 2005, from <http://www.nevadasagebrush.com/media/paper553/news/2004/11/02/Rift/Apples.Ipod.Is.Taking.Campuses.By.Storm-789948.shtml>