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TELEVISION & RADIO

Podcasting: A blog that you can listen to

All you need is a computer, a phone and a gadget from Radio Shack, and an audience awaits on the Web.

By John Jurgensen
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Jeffrey Kerekes doesn't need a powerful antenna or a license from the government to be a one-man radio station.

The New Haven, Conn., psychotherapist put together his most recent talk show at the kitchen table. Wearing slippers and sipping a cup of tea, he used a laptop computer, a cellphone and a \$30 gadget from Radio Shack to record his weekly program.

The final product, unlike the conventional radio shows it resembled, never hit the airwaves. Instead, Kerekes posted the show on his website (Intraspectus.com), where visitors can download it directly to their computer or, using free software, schedule it to show up automatically on an iPod or other digital music player.

That's the difference between a broadcast and a "podcast," as productions such as Kerekes' are called. Like AM radio on demand, podcasts are the audio equivalent of the personal blogs that have proliferated on the Web in recent years. And as such, these do-it-yourself creations have literally given voice to a growing clique — a virtual network of podcasters — since the technology took off a few months ago.

"There are no barriers. I can do this whenever and wherever I want," says Kerekes, 32.

Because he moonlights as a Web designer, he has the computer skills it takes to easily launch his podcast, which he thinks of as a way to attract clients and coax people past the stigma of seeking therapy.

"In some circles, it's hip to have a therapist, but not for everyone," he says. "In the middle of the night, they can download the show, and no one has to know."

The technology making that possible is a program called iPodder. Developed in part by Adam Curry, a former MTV video jockey, the "aggregator" (available for free at ipodder.org) looks for the shows you subscribe to, grabbing new ones as they appear and downloading them as MP3 files to a computer or portable music player that you can listen to when you want.

Since Curry's show, "The Daily Source Code," debuted in August, podcasts have mushroomed across the Web. As a sign that the trend is emerging from its infancy, National Public Radio, the BBC and other major networks have recently started offering some recorded programs as podcasts. In Southern California, KCRW-FM (89.9) is aggressively promoting the fact that many of its programs are available for downloading.

But most podcasts are homegrown affairs and unashamedly amateur. For example, after a catchy musical intro, Kerekes began his most recent show by apologizing to his listeners — a few hundred so far — for the sound quality. And even though Curry's productions are more polished (and more widely heard), he often refers to the new equipment and techniques he's tinkering with.

The town commons of this still-insular community is Podcastalley.com, a clearinghouse and directory of about 1,600 podcasts. Though there are other directories, Podcast Alley is where quasi-stars are made via the podcast Top 10.

Though they generally don't pump out music that could get them in legal trouble with the recording industry, plenty of podcasters feature underground or burgeoning bands. Other shows inhabit such niches as wine, films, weight loss and Christian evangelism.

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