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Posted on Mon, Mar. 28, 2005

Pod people invade broadcasters' turf

Amateur hour: Audio bloggers grow into virtual radio stations

By John Jurgensen
Hartford Courant

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 cell phone 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 Web site (Intraspectus.com), where visitors can download it directly to their computers 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 thought of as a way to attract clients and coax people past



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Geoff Maciolek, 23, of Westbrook, Conn., is the producer of "Mondays," a weekly online podcast of geek-speak and wisecracks.

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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 last 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.

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. Although there are other directories, Podcast Alley is where quasi-stars are made via the podcast Top 10.

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.

To understand the range of topics, styles and sophistication on the virtual dial, the listener need only survey the offerings coming out of Connecticut.

Besides Kerekes' weekly therapy primers, there's the "Combat Information Center," in which a father of two from Weston, Conn., holds forth on the science-fiction TV series "Battlestar Galactica."

"It's really a 2005 equivalent of putting out a fan letter," Alan Light says.

Meanwhile, three Yale football players are challenging the giants of AM talk radio by producing a sports podcast.

"We're just throwing it out there, and if anyone wants to listen to it and enjoy it, that's fine," says Barton Simmons, 23, one of the co-hosts of "The Penalty Box." It's the

flagship show of the ambitiously named Xtrera Podcasting Network, the brainchild of Simmons' roommate, Ken Estrera, 24, who created its Web site (Xtrera.com).

"We made it look a little more professional than it actually is. Basically, we took two \$10 microphones from Wal-Mart and plugged them into a laptop. It's pretty simple," says Estrera, a former linebacker who, like Simmons, graduated from Yale in December.

If grass-roots shows such as Estrera's sum up the current state of podcasting, then Carl Franklin's venture probably represent its future.

A 37-year-old computer-programming guru, Franklin turns out two podcasts from the fifth floor of an old office building in downtown New London, Conn. And unlike most of his colleagues, he gets paid to do so. Last summer, Franklin created a talk show devoted to the technical intricacies of .Net, a piece of Microsoft software. Because of its loyal following, ".Net Rocks!" currently earns about \$120,000 a year in ad sponsorship, Franklin says.

"Mondays," a ".Net Rocks!" spinoff, is a wide-ranging hour of geek-speak and wisecracks.

"I have the most vile Michael Jackson joke," Franklin says into the mike to his co-hosts, only two of whom are actually in the studio with him. Two others, Mark Miller and Richard Campbell, are on the phone at home in Los Angeles and Vancouver, British Columbia, respectively.

After the show is recorded, producer Geoff Maciolek will synch the individual voice tracks, which they upload from home, to make it sound as if they're in the same room. It's all part of a sophisticated recording and editing exercise that will take Maciolek most of the weekend.



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