

TechMatters: Invasion of the Podcasters

Krista Graham, Central Michigan University

Podcasting. The term sounds like something straight out of a “late-night science-fiction double-feature picture show”. But rest assured there is actually nothing extraterrestrial about podcasts or the podcasters who produce them. In fact, the term was created through the simple combination of two other words: *iPod* (Apple’s digital music device) and *broadcasting*.

At this point in time, podcasting is a rapidly growing technology trend that many expect will soon evolve into a significant educational tool. As instruction librarians, therefore, it is important that we begin to learn about this technology and consider how we can use it to enhance our own instructional programs.

So, what is this thing called podcasting?

Quite simply, a podcast is an audio or video file that is syndicated on the web via an RSS feed. (For a refresher on RSS syndication, please refer to last issue’s *TechMatters* column). Once they are made available online, podcasts can be downloaded and listened to on a variety of digital audio devices including MP3 players, Pocket PCs, cell phones, and/or desktop computers. Despite the name, it is important to note that neither listening to, nor watching, a podcast requires an iPod, although the popular device can, of course, be used for that purpose.

As with any other RSS feed, subscribing to a podcast frees the user from having to constantly check for new content. Rather, special RSS aggregators referred to as “podcatchers” monitor a user’s feeds and can automatically download new audio and video files as they become available. If downloaded to a portable device, podcasts further free the user to listen or watch at the time *and* place most convenient. Taken together, the portable and on-demand nature of podcasts may begin to explain the growing popularity of the phenomenon.

Finding Podcasts

Now that you know what podcasts are, you might want to peruse a few to get a more concrete sense of their nature. The best way to find them is via podcast directories. There are a variety of such directories available including PodcastAlley [<http://www.podcastalley.com>], Podcast.net [<http://www.podcast.net>], Podfeed.net [[http://](http://www.podfeed.net)

www.podfeed.net], and the Apple iTunes Podcast Directory [Requires download from: <http://www.apple.com/itunes/podcasts/>]. In general, most directories are browsable by subject and also keyword searchable, allowing you to easily locate feeds of interest.

Despite the fact that it is still a relatively new trend, librarians from all types of libraries have already begun to experiment with podcasting. Library podcasts have been developed to promote and market library services, share recordings of library events and lectures, and even to teach students about the library. If you are interested in finding examples of library produced podcasts, the easiest way to do so is to conduct a straightforward Google search for **+podcast + (library or libraries)**.

Podcatchers

As previously mentioned, a “podcatcher” is a specialized RSS aggregator that you can use to monitor your audio/video feeds, listen to files, and download them to a portable media player. It is worth mentioning that a “podcatcher” is not necessary in order to listen to a podcast, however, just as with any other RSS aggregator, using one will make managing multiple feeds easier. Popular “podcatchers” include Juice (formerly iPodder) [<http://juicereceiver.sourceforge.net/>], jPodder [<http://jpodder.com>], and Apple iTunes Player which has a built in podcatcher [<http://www.apple.com/itunes/download/>].

Podcasts as Tools for Teaching and Learning

In the last two years, quite a bit of experimentation and discussion has occurred related to the potential that podcasts may hold as powerful teaching and learning tools. For example, in 2004 Duke University undertook an initiative to supply all first year students with iPods “to encourage creative uses” of the technology on campus. A report summarizing their evaluation of the program is available online at: [http://cit.duke.edu/pdf/ipod_initiative_04_05.pdf]. Amongst other things, they found that the devices had academic uses as a means of disseminating course content, recording classroom activities, and as a study support tools.

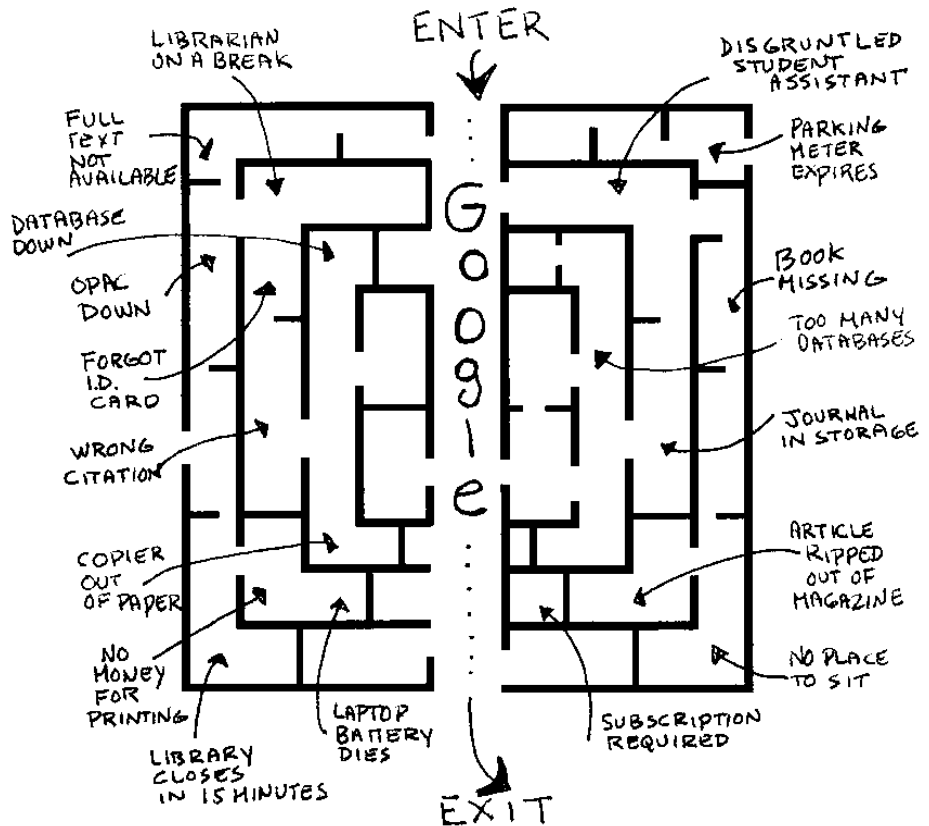
In a November/December 2005 *Educause Review* ar-

TechMatters continued on p. 11

sat a reference desk, we've had ample opportunity to observe students oozing about the OPAC, sloshing about the stacks and gunking up a database or two.

Joe, one of our Gen Y student assistants, and I were blabbing about this recently. I asked him to visualize this for me. He came up with something like this:

When I get a chance, I'm going to see if I can find out more about the Japanese research study about slime mold. Wish I could remember the name of that professor.



TechMatters continued from p. 4

ticle [<http://www.educause.edu/LibraryDetailPage/666?ID=ERM0561>], Gardner Campbell speculated about the possibilities of a learning environment where podcasting was an integral part of the institutional culture. He imagines an educational setting where podcasting supplements the traditional modes of learning and students are engaged and excited about the learning process as a result.

Although educators are only beginning to explore the possibilities, it is clear that there is a movement afoot to incorporate podcasts into the educational realm. For examples of educational podcasts, visit the Education Podcast Network [<http://www.epnweb.org>], which provides “podcast programming that may be helpful to teachers looking for content to teach with and about, and to explore issues of teaching and learning in the 21st century”. Similarly, the Podcast Directory for Educators [<http://recap.ltd.uk/podcasting/>] is a UK-based directory containing podcasts for educational use. In addition, they produce their own podcast feed to promote educational podcasting in schools, colleges, and other organizations.

Creating a feed

Having been introduced to the concept of podcasting and its potential as an educational tool, you may be inspired to create your own feed. You may want to create a podcast to supplement your library instruction classes or to promote your instructional program. Either way, a description of how to create a feed is beyond the scope of this article. Fortunately, there are a variety of excellent online tutorials to help you get started.

Here are a few:

Beginner's Guide to Podcast Creation by Kirk McElhearn

<http://www.ilounge.com/index.php/articles/comments/beginners-guide-to-podcast-creation/>

Create Podcasts Using Your PC by Jake Ludington

<http://www.windowsdevcenter.com/lpt/a/5735>

Creating a Podcast by Bart Farkas

(Sample chapter from the book: “Secrets of Podcasting: Audio Blogging for the Masses”)