

The Web: Pols embracing podcasting

December 7 2005

Howard Dean this week headlined the Democratic National Committee's first "podcast" on the Internet -- a brief, recorded audio broadcast that listeners around the globe downloaded, signaling, experts told United Press International's The Web, that podcasting is going mainstream.

The embrace of the technology is a first for the DNC -- though during last year's presidential campaign the camps of President Bush and election loser John Kerry relied heavily on an earlier generation of Internet technology to reach voters.

Experts told United Press International's The Web that politicians are usually the last of the early adopters to embrace a new technology before the masses embrace the tool.

"The DNC podcast is a new, exciting way to reach out to voters and activists," said Dean, chairman of the DNC, in online audio remarks, adding that the technology had the potential to "communicate our values to voters more quickly, and effectively, and directly than ever."

According to Ted Demopoulos, co-author with Internet guru Shel Holtz of the forthcoming book, "Blogging for Business" (Dearborn Trade Publishing, February 2006), there are about 15,000 to 20,000 podcasts on the Internet today, and about 500 new podcasts are being created weekly.

"To some extent, podcasts are the next wave of blogging," Demopoulos told The Web. "Blogs are still growing rapidly in number and influence

and podcasts -- audio blogs -- are the most explosive part of that growth."

Podcasts, Demopoulos said, have several advantages over blogs. Podcasts can be listened to when driving a car, running on the treadmill, or even trimming the shrubs in the yard. "I'm burning the latest forimmediaterelease.biz podcast now for my drive to Boston," said Demopoulos. "A great use of otherwise wasted time."

What's more, the podcasts are even more personal in feel than blogs are. "I feel I know and trust the podcasters I listen to weekly," said Demopoulos. Podcasts are also cheaper to produce than broadcast radio shows and can be used to target very narrow market niches, like Democratic activists, counter-cultural groups and pornography fans.

Lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transsexual activists have begun podcasting a show called "here!", featuring interviews with gay actors and writers and producers. "The 'here!' Podcast is an informative and entertaining way for audience members to experience all of the great resources 'here!' offers the LGBT community," said Eric Feldman, executive vice president of programming and operations at here!, based in Los Angeles.

Another more middle-of-the-road site called PodTech.net, founded by entrepreneur John Furrier, provides news about Silicon Valley firms and other businesses.

Some real-estate professionals, for example, are also using podcasts to sell upscale homes.

Anyone can podcast, just like anyone can blog, by signing up at a site like www.podcasterhosting.com.

"The hurdles to creating and publishing quality audio -- and soon video --

have been virtually removed," said Chris Shipley, co-founder, editorial director and executive producer of the Demo Conferences, the San Francisco-based technology insider event producer. "Recording equipment is now low cost and easily accessible, as is publishing content via the Web. Exciting new talent and fresh voices are finding an audience."

Listeners seem to enjoy the accessibility of podcasts, experts said. "From a user standpoint, podcasting is catching on due to the magic of RSS (Real Simple Syndication)," said Andrew Foote, senior account executive at Peppercom Inc., a New York-based advertising agency. "The ability to subscribe to your favorite audio/video feeds and have them delivered to you electronically is extremely convenient. It's like TiVo in a way -- you can select the programming you want and it will be permanently delivered to you -- all while you are out living life."

The model of Internet publishing is changing with podcasting, moreover, Foote said. Rather than surfing the Web to find suitable content, that content is "pushed to them, based on their preferences."

Some techno skeptics, however, don't think there really is anything new to the podcasting concept. They say that back in the 1970s, kids copied vinyl records on audio cassettes and carried them around. Then in the 1990s, they played CDs on Sony Walkmans. "Our iPods (today) simply enable us to acquire content more easily and with a higher-quality result," said Mike Bloxham, director of testing and assessment at the Center for Media and Design at Ball State University in Muncie, Ind.

But he concedes that with podcasting and Apple iPod players, "we're reaching critical mass. We're in danger of having a genuine medium on our hands if the rate of development is maintained over the next couple of years," he said.

Who knows what's next? Perhaps President Bush delivering his weekly radio address by podcast from the White House?

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