TECHNOLOGY

Newspapers should work to reach iPod listeners

By Robert R. Mercer
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Newspapers think they are in the printing business, not the news gathering business. My wife, Rose Mary, who was an editor for 20 years, said that for years. But no one else could see this and The Tulsa Tribune is history.

After using the iPod and podcasts as my primary United States news source here in Prague, I am certain newspaper publishers had better listen to my wife.

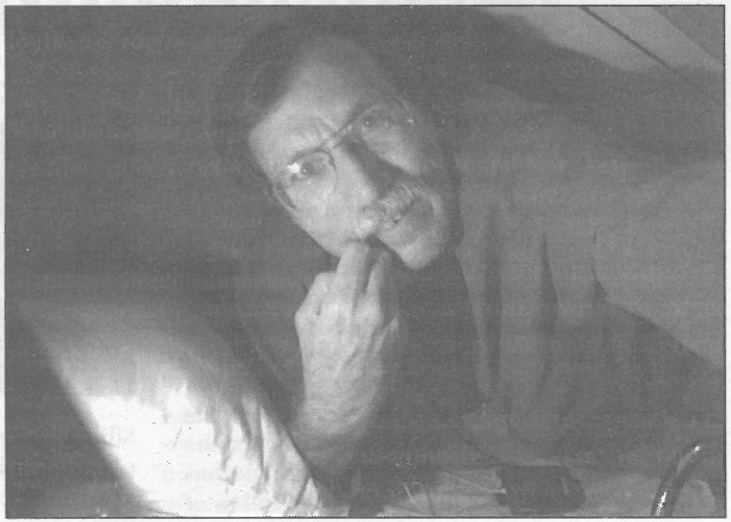
I'll bet most publishers have dismissed the iPod as just another fad – an annoyance dangling from the ears of young reporters and students.

A little more respect and fear is due. My little cigarette box-sized Photo iPod holds more than three days of jazz. That still leaves 15 gigabytes free to download photos from my Nikon D-70, allowing me to leave the laptop at home when traveling to Berlin. Or I plug it into students' laptops and capture their homework. Plus, I plug in a microphone and take notes or conduct radio-quality interviews.

It is even an alarm clock "radio," a really lousy one. But this alarm should be enough to wake up newspaper people, because right now, it lets me listen to "Nightline" and the Los Angeles Times.

I am teaching journalism, photography and video production this fall in the North Orange County Community College District's Semester Abroad Program in Prague, Czech Republic. Most of my students have iPods, too. We are addicted to the device.

I agree with those who say it is a fad. But it is a fad to which journalists and my fellow j-instructors should pay close attention.



Self portrait courtesy of Robert R. Mercer

Robert Mercer's iPod goes everywhere with him in Europe, even providing news in the top bunk of a sleeper train bound for Eastern Slovakia.

Right now podcasting is, well, CLUNKY!

The first frustration of podcasting is the software. You have to find the iPod links buried in the most inaccessible region of the news sites. One has to right click on an icon, copy a code, open the iPod software and paste the code into a box. Every day, one has to remember to open the iPod software and tell it to capture any new postings.

Again, podcasting fails to meet the first challenge of using a mass medium: To be as easy as dialing a telephone – well, actually, a lot easier than that given my Japanese cell phone running on the Czech phone system. But the cell phone is a great alarm clock.

If I subscribe to a podcast, it should just appear on my laptop, ready for download, automatically.

There is no imperative I can detect for distributors to post podcasts "same time, same station." That said, ABC News and NBC News religiously post their Sunday morning political shows by noon Pacific Time. CBS News lags.

National Public Radio and the BBC have the upload times posted on their sites for many shows. The first news gatherer who treats the podcast listener with real respect will gain significant audience.

Podcasts often consist of three-minute wastes of time – ABC's "Hollywood Wrap" and PBS' "The American Experience." When one considers the labor necessary to retrieve the podcast, serious, full-hour shows (that's really 40 minutes in broadcasting) should be delivered. NBC's "Meet the Press," ABC News' "This Week" and NPR's "On the Media" are doing this.

Shows made with the podcast in mind show TLC. These include: BBC's "Go Digital" and "NPR Books," a compilation of book reviews from many NPR broadcasts

ABC News, while delivering the nightly news to me about six hours after it airs, has been giving me only a 15-minute bite out of "This Week." "Meet the Press" gives me the entire feast. While I enjoy George Will and Cokie Roberts when they debate, I want to hear the entire show – and that was delivered for the first time yesterday.

Newspaper people have to understand podcasting is changing even as I listen. There are software updates about every two weeks.

Short shows really annoy. One has to constantly thread back through the iPod menu to start a new program. And doesn't anyone in these newsrooms understand sound levels? And why does CBS just cut off the audio in mid-sentence?

The Los Angeles Times offers a few podcasts. "Travel Insider" is informative, but certainly not timely. The occasional traveler probably will never find the well-hidden links. Also, to paraphrase Edna Buchanan, "Newspaper people read funny."

And there are those horrible voices that announce you are listening to a podcast! To quote Homer Simpson, "Doh!"

And I want my NPR. I don't want three, five-minute news sound bites per day. I want all two hours of "All Things Considered" and "Morning Edition." What is it, NPR, are you afraid we donors are going to steal your shows?

NPR's "On the Media" is perfect iPod fare. One can listen even a month later and still get useful, entertaining information. Once news is delayed more than 12 hours, as it is in newspaper publishing, it has to have more detail and analysis.

Podcasting has a long way to go as

See iPOD Page 17

Papers should get iPOD systems

From Page 9

a news medium. I don't want to lug a nine-pound computer to a smoky bar just because it offers free wireless internet. I want podcasts to come straight to my iPod as soon as they are posted. I want useful content. And I want podcasts posted at predicable times.

Podcasters, quit underestimating your audience's attention span. Newspaper publishers, you have the depth for serious podcasting, so quit underestimating your audiences' technology skills.

If news organizations stop treating the podcast as shovel ware and treat it as a news outlet, I think it could seriously erode newspaper distribution. Here in the land of $2 newspapers, the computer is quickly becoming the news medium of choice.

The iPod has all the attributes of a newspaper. It fits in your pocket (Oops! Newspapers don't do this.). You can use it when and where you want. You can review the quote you misunderstood. And, to rebut the old cliché before a newspaper publisher spouts it – you can even take it to the bathroom.

Newspaper publishers are not going to stop the presses this year. They are still making 20 percent profit, beating Wall Street. But setting up an easy-to-find iPod news distribution system on your website can be done by one of my students tomorrow. And when the presses finally stop, no one will notice, because those readers will all be dead.

While my 20-year-old students are listening strictly to downloaded music, a student writing a mass media research paper on the subject has found data reporting his 30 to 45-year-old cousins are podcasting.

Oh, heck! Forget the iPod. I've already said it is clunky. Go for cell phone news distribution. It already has video, and a better alarm clock.

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