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Notes from a Broadcaster on the Podcast Revolution

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The technical and social revolution called podcasting, it's fair to say, caught broadcasters upside the head. In little more than a year, they have seen their towering transmitters and pricey strips of the radio and TV dial lose their value as long term investments. Getting out a message and connecting with your customers, supporters, and demographic, it seems, may require a whole new kind of real estate. As one broadcaster put it, looking at all the disruption in traditional ways of doing business, "Dislocation, dislocation, dislocation."

The big changes began about 14 months ago when Dave Winer and Adam Curry took a creative look at the Web, put a few of its tools together in a new way, added some code and, then, by word and deed, showed how anyone with a passion for some subject could talk about it, out loud, to anyone who wanted to listen.

What Dave and Adam did was Chapter One of The Podcast Saga. Today, by my reading, we're approaching the end of Volume Four. First, there was Podcast: Origins, A Story for Techies. Then there was Podcast: Shooting for the Moon? (Speculations on business models in the pages of The Wall Street Journal and Business Week). Then Podcast the Alien: It Lives Among Us. (Stories in the life style section of national and local newspapers and magazines about isolated podcasters popping up in homes and neighborhoods around the country). Then Podcast the Portal: The Apple Has Landed. (Our current phase, stories and theories about the imminent death of traditional media and the monetization of digital media production and distribution. As I write, the hot topic of the week is "Will Ricky Gervais turn millions of free downloads into 7 million bucks of subscription fees as the first pay-to-hear-podcast on iTunes?" A topic that will probably be hopelessly outdated by the time you read this.)

Clearly, a phase change is in the works. On the one hand, the old accepted truths and practices of broadcasting are imploding; on the other, a kind of community-building and communications movement is growing, explosively, into something like a new marketplace, a new medium, a new media culture. And, frankly, neither I nor any of the experts I talk to, has any idea what next week's, much less next month's significant development is going to be -- not because it hasn't been spotted, but because it probably hasn't been created; not because big developments in this space develop slowly, but because, like some vast global weather pattern, they happen so fast. In an equation this complex, crunching away at light speed on everything at once,



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little things from out of nowhere can become big factors in to time at all. And, to name perhaps the most important trend of all, not enough people have yet had their first date, much less their first kiss, with an iPod or MP3 or Video Player, to understand how exciting it can be.

Call it a "tipping point," but the mass of users needed to turn a new technology into a commodity still hasn't appeared. Even if over 40 million iPods have been sold, no two people I know who have one, opened the box, used, and enjoyed one, have gotten it the same way.

From my own unscientific survey, the iPod seems mainly to be a gift from parents to children and children to grandparents. Anyone I know still working for a living simply doesn't have the time to get involved -- and turned on.

If I read the history of past technologies correctly, until the tipping point of mass acceptance comes, no one really has a clue how the gadgetry that brings us digital media will be used.

Take the VHS. It was invented to tape television shows and presumably kill the movie industry. It caught on as a device to play rented feature films that gave the movie industry a whole new start.

Take the Microwave (or Radar Range, as we used to call it). Designed to cook fresh food and encourage home cooking (a baked potato in eight minutes! A whole turkey in half an hour!!) it caught on as a re-fresher of cold coffee and a defroster of frozen meals made by some factory in Kansas.

Take the Answering Machine. Intended to keep us in touch with callers when we were out, it caught on as our main means of staying out of touch with callers when we were in.

When it comes to mass acceptance of a new technology, what works for and rewards the user is often profoundly at variance with what the engineers had in mind.

When I started working at WGBH in Boston 35 years ago, new programming ideas and new portable, video-tape technologies were transforming educational television into today's PBS. It was a revolution. Now, as then, a similar, digital revolution is happening in public broadcasting, and, once again, a lot of it seems to be happening at WGBH. Being present at two media revolutions hasn't made me any wiser about what happens next - just more grateful for all the opportunities that exciting, disruptive times give you to think fresh and have fun building something new.

The program I produce , "Morning Stories," began as a traditional broadcast in January of 2004. It became public radio's first podcast ten months later in October of that year. As a broadcast, Morning Stories has changed little in form or content and is heard, once a week, by around 20,000 in the Boston area. As a podcast, however, it has grown into a way of sharing personal stories and a passion for story telling in general, and has been downloaded over three million times by people in over seventy countries who can listen whenever they want, who contribute actively to our content and who share the programming with people in their own communities around the world.

My experiences with "Morning Stories" has taught me that podcasting, as an art form, a means of communication, and a form of community building and collaboration with listeners, is

something new and amazingly rich. I find it so inspiring, in fact, I'll venture a prediction. Well, not a prediction, but an impassioned hunch, a semi-certainty rising not from my head but my heart. We are, today, in the most creative phase of this transition, still free to play and relatively safe from the temptations of making big (or any) money fast. This won't last forever. It may not even last another six months. Once it goes, though, we may look back on the first two years of podcasting as the time when it took shape as a new medium. In every language, the new forms of expression come from the youngest speakers and, at this point, we're all beginners, free to be aware of our passions and to find ways of expressing them.

The majority of us have come from the world of the web, and blogging; a few of us have come from the world of broadcasting. But, whatever the route, we meet in podcasting and we have a lot to teach each other. For my colleagues in public broadcasting, most of whom have yet to explore podcasting as a place to create new content and new forms, and for the community of producers and listeners in general, I think the best is yet to come.

For a long time now the internet has brought us whatever data we wanted about the world. What we're on the verge of experiencing with podcasting, with video blogging, and with all the other forms to which they may give rise, is a way of getting to experience that world in far more direct, human, and personally significant ways. Though video, through voice, in active conversations head to head and heart to heart.

Don't worry that our numbers are still small. A lot sooner than anyone anticipates, we will be the biggest and the most interactive audience the world has known.

Tony Kahn is a veteran, award winning writer, producer, narrator and host of more than 50 radio and television programs and series for the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), National Public Radio (NPR), Nickelodeon, A&E and Boston television stations WGBH and WCVB. Kahn is the producer and host of the radio show and podcast Morning Stories from WGBH, public radio's first podcast. He graduated Magna cum Laude and Phi Beta Kappa from Harvard University.

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