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What do you think about podcasting and satellite radio? Will these technological advances help bring more radio journalism to the public?



the author

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GLASER ONLINE

Will Satellite, 'Podcasting' Bring a Renaissance to Radio Journalism?

Longtime NPR host Bob Edwards goes to XM satellite radio. Schlock king Howard Stern jumps to Sirius. People are using RSS feeds to get radio shows on their portable MP3 players. It's a new day in radio, but will journalism flourish?

Mark Glaser ✉
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A funny thing happened when I decided to try out XM Radio, a pay satellite radio network. Two shock jocks, Opie & Anthony, were discussing how people probably didn't want to hear such an obscene bit so early in the morning. But then they realized that people might be tuning in at a different time, hearing a time-delayed broadcast or replaying a show, as I was, by streaming online.

"I think we'll have to throw all the rules of radio out the f---ing window!" said Opie, a.k.a. Gregg Hughes. For shock jocks, throwing out the FCC obscenity rules is the whole point of making the jump to satellite radio; kingpin Howard Stern made the biggest jump yet to satellite radio with a \$500 million deal with Sirius, set to begin in 2006.

But the rules for the broadcast radio business -- the traditional "terrestrial" radio -- are changing in many other ways, with satellite radio coming on like cable TV with hundreds of niche channels for a monthly fee. And the recent "podcasting" phenomenon offers a relatively simple way to get MP3 audio programs via RSS feeds, letting you play news stories, music shows, comedy and more on your own time via your portable MP3 player.

With the sorry state of radio journalism -- a victim of massive corporate buyouts -- can these new technologies bring a broader range of audio reportage than just public radio, local AM news and repurposed Big Media fare like ESPN Radio? The jury is still out, but radio junkies are filled with hope.

"It's a ripe moment for radio," said Jake Shapiro, executive director of PRX, an innovative online exchange for public radio shows. "Several trends are converging: digital audio production tools are cheap and accessible; new distribution paths like streaming, satellite radio, digital broadcast radio, wireless and 'podcasting' are emerging. And concerns over broader media consolidation underline the importance of independent voices and non-commercial journalism."

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Jake Shapiro, Executive Director of PRX

won't stop him from taking cheap potshots at these outlets, when necessary. You can contact him with any juicy tidbits about online journalism at glaze@sprintmail.com.

PRX lets public radio programmers troll for digital radio content with a searchable database of programs, but anybody can [sign up](#) to listen to shows and review them. Shapiro notes that the Net has become a much bigger part of the radio production process, with easier digital distribution, as well as radio Web sites giving pieces a longer shelf life.

As for satellite radio, the two main rivals in the U.S., Sirius and XM, are relying mostly on repurposed journalism from broadcast networks. XM, the current leader with 2.5 million subscribers paying \$9.95 per month, offers news channels such as Bloomberg Radio, Fox News Channel, National Public Radio, as well as XM Public Radio, featuring [The Bob Edwards Show](#). Edwards was recently fired from hosting NPR's "Morning Edition" and is now doing an original one-hour interview show for XM.

Sirius is trying to come from behind, with only 600,000 subscribers paying \$12.95 per month. The rival services require different satellite radio receivers, setting up a possible VHS/Betamax situation, where people are stuck with orphaned technology. Sirius also offers mainly repurposed material from CNBC, Fox News Channel, NPR, CNN, etc. While Sirius is doing cartwheels over getting Howard Stern and his millions of listeners, it hasn't shown the desire to create its own news programs.

"Howard's joining Sirius is a transformational event in the radio industry," said Ron Rodrigues, senior director of public relations for Sirius. "[As for news], our philosophy is to provide our subscribers with the greatest variety, selection and choice. We are working on a variety of innovative technological advances that go way beyond our current capabilities."

Radio veteran Doug Mitchell is project manager for NPR's [Next Generation Radio](#), helping train minority students in radio journalism. Mitchell subscribes to Sirius for his car, and listens to XM at home -- while also throwing in some terrestrial radio. He believes the Stern move will benefit all of satellite radio, bringing needed attention to the technology. But journalism is another story.

"In terms of journalism, they're not creating entire new and exciting ventures into investigative worlds, like 'let's look into government, and let's do an investigative series,'" Mitchell told me. "With Bob Edwards and now Howard Stern, it seems like the satellite radio people are looking to create original shows. But it's always first driven by the personality; you have to have a name brand, in the individual."

So while satellite radio companies might have snagged some bigger personalities, it would take a much bigger investment to create their own version of public radio or ABC News. "Here at NPR, they're a little nervous [about satellite]," said Mitchell, though he thinks that NPR and Public Radio International still have very little competition in their realm.

Build your own radio station

While satellite radio will always have limited appeal due to the monthly charge, podcasting offers a free way for you to create your own radio station on the fly each day, listening when you want. Satellite radio services have been loathe to allow people to record their programs due to copyright concerns. XM Radio threatened legal action against the maker of TimeTrax software, which lets users record satellite shows on MP3s.

But [Reuters reported](#) that XM is planning its own TiVo-like devices soon that will allow users to pause and rewind live satellite broadcasts. Plus XM has a deal for streaming its programming onto the next generation of TiVo television recorders.

Still, podcasting goes much further, giving listeners full control over what they listen to, depending on the available RSS feeds. Basically, you need a portable MP3 player -- not necessarily an iPod -- Apple's free iTunes software, and the new [iPodder](#) software. The latter is an open source application, birthed by [Adam Curry](#), the former MTV VJ, blogger and serial entrepreneur now based in Amsterdam.

Curry runs the [iPodder site](#), which includes a nascent [directory](#) of podcasting feeds with everything from music to news to audiobooks. So far, the selection is weighted to technology radio shows, and it sometimes seems as if a small group of people are just listening to each other.

"So this morning, here in my hotel room, I listened to the latest edition of Adam Curry's Daily Source Code, Dave Winer's Morning Coffee Notes about the open-sourcing of Frontier, and a conversation between Adam and Dave about all the above, iPodder, Trade Secrets Radio and much more," wrote Doc Searls [in his Weblog](#) about his new fascination with podcasting.

But Curry is optimistic that podcasting will catch on with a much wider audience. He thinks MP3 player manufacturers will be able to build iPodder functionality right into their devices. "Mass appeal is likely, since the installed base of MP3 players is huge," he said. "Most of them have gigabytes of empty disk space and users are apparently really enjoying this new use for their players."

Beyond the smaller productions, there are now more polished podcasts from public radio station [WGBH](#) as well as [KOMO 1000 AM](#) news in Seattle. KOMO is the first commercial news station to take the leap into podcasting. The station's assistant director of news and programming, Stan Orchard, told me that his station has always been on the cutting edge with technology, launching a Web site in 1994 and an RSS feed last year. Podcasting was an easy addition.

"For the user it's easy-squeasy," Orchard said via e-mail. "They just install iPodder or some other such program and type in our podcast feed URL. That's it. As for setting it up

at this end...all it takes is a RSS feed which we already had. We just had to tweak it a bit. Then we had to crank out some stories. Again, we were already doing that for the Web site so it wasn't much [work]."

One of the challenges for KOMO was getting the radio reporters to think a little differently, according to Orchard. Now they have to consider three formats while producing a story: the radio broadcast, the MP3 podcast and a written story for the Web site.

While the iPodder directory is still a bit threadbare, a commercial service called [AudioFeast](#) offers more than 300 copy-protected radio shows, mainly from big-name media companies. The cost is \$49.95 per year, but the service will only work with select non-iPod players that use the WMA format; iPods use AAC or MP3 -- a limiting factor at the moment.

Look ma, no iPod!

While podcasting is only in its embryonic stage, people are already looking beyond time-shifted radio on portable MP3 players. NPR's Mitchell, for one, thinks that ubiquitous wireless Net connections could bring on-demand radio to a variety of devices, cutting out the computer as content server.

"The next big thing is...I think eventually you'll be able to wirelessly download something, stick on some headphones, and sit with your iPod or phone and listen to a program," Mitchell said. "I think you'll eventually be able to do that. Handheld devices will keep shrinking. You can already download and listen to shows online."

Plus, Mitchell notes just how cheap radio production has become. Now a college student can spend about \$1,000 on audio equipment, maybe \$2,000 on an Apple laptop, and with the right training, start reporting stories and put them online. "I don't have to burn CDs unless someone wants to purchase it," Mitchell says. "It's extremely cost effective. All the barriers are coming down. It's becoming extremely decentralized."

For the independent radio producer, the biggest barrier might be getting heard above the noise of so many like-minded folks online. Adam Curry says that skill, experience and talent will still set people apart. "There will be a lot of crap, and just like Weblogs, we'll also have our superstars," he said. "And everyone can have their 15 minutes [of fame]."

Blogger Russell Beattie, a technology consultant and programmer based in San Francisco, thinks that next-generation mobile phones will play a vital role in the wireless radio revolution.

"Right now there are four million iPods, and yet there are going to be 650 million phones shipped this year alone," [Beattie wrote](#). "How big will podcasting be when all those

phones can be 'podcast players'? Think you're at the beginning of a trend now? Just wait....The phone may not hold the thousands of hours of audio that a normal iPod holds, but it'll be perfect for the day's podcasts, no?...Convergence, ubiquity and connectivity are going to change society as we know it. Podcasting is only at the very tip of this."



Adam Curry, former MTV VJ, blogger and serial entrepreneur

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