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Podcasting: A fad with a future?

Andrew Spencer, Liaison Librarian, Macquarie University Library
Corrinne Hughan, Frontline Services Officer, Macquarie University Library

Abstract

Generally, one of the most commonly used Web 2.0 technologies in libraries is the podcast. It is seen to be a low-cost and convenient way of providing information about the library, and as a tool with which library clients will readily interact.

Based on discussions with libraries that have introduced podcasts, and the literature, we explored the realities of using podcasts in the library. The planning process utilised by these “early adopters” is examined and critically evaluated. The benefits of podcasts are also discussed.

Introduction

There are many examples in the literature of the use of podcasts in higher education, and how they can be useful to students e.g. (Cebeci & Tekdal,
2006), (Lee & Chan, 2007), (Copley, 2007). However it seems that very little work has been done on evaluating the podcasts prepared by libraries and determining if they are a worthwhile investment of staff time. This paper will examine the current podcasting landscape in several libraries around Australia, and will identify gaps in relation to the areas of planning and evaluation. The benefits of podcasts will also be discussed.

A podcast is defined as "a media file that is distributed over the Internet for playback on personal computers (PCs) and portable media players" (Copley, 2007, p. 387). Since there are many sources of information about what podcasts are and how to create one e.g. (Griffey, 2007), (Stephens, 2007a), this process will not be described here. According to Jowitt (2007) the benefits of podcasts include:

- Portability, flexibility and convenience
- Ability to asynchronously listen whenever, wherever on whatever device is chosen
- Multitasking while moving about, exercising and travelling
- Access easily via the internet, at the time of need and outside normal opening hours
- Ability to repeatedly listen
- Playback speed can be altered (beneficial for foreign students)
- Subscriptions automatically load into the podcatcher
- Choose what you want to listen to
- Suits auditory learners (p. 6)

A check of the websites of Australian university libraries in January 2008 indicated that 15 out of the 40 libraries who are members of the Council of Australian University Librarians currently provide at least one podcast. Macquarie University Library (MUL) is currently one of the 25 libraries that do not provide podcasts.
Background

In July 2007, MUL opened applications for MUL staff for the Eoin H. Wilkinson Service Innovation Grant. The purpose of this grant was to provide up to $10,000 for staff member/s from the library to "investigate and assess a new idea and to produce a plan for a service innovation relevant to the Library's strategic goals" (Macquarie University Library, 2007).

We were fortunate enough to be awarded the Grant, and the service innovation that we chose to investigate was podcasts. Our initial proposal was to develop and evaluate podcasts. However, due to the short length of time available to us (3 months), and MUL’s desire to gather evidence to justify service introduction, the proposal was modified and became a feasibility study rather than a pilot program.

Methodology

The information which was to be included in the feasibility study was to come from two main sources - a literature review, and visits and discussions with staff from libraries which had already begun producing podcasts. We were able to visit six libraries (three in Melbourne and three in Perth), and had email discussions with staff from three libraries in New South Wales. Of these, eight were academic libraries, and one was a State Library. The staff from all nine libraries were very generous with their time and provided us with a great deal of interesting and useful information. As a result of our discussions and our examination of the literature, we identified a range of benefits as well as issues surrounding the development and implementation of podcasts.
Benefits of podcasts

The benefits of library podcasts which emerged fell into two broad areas - opportunities for collaboration, and staff development.

Opportunities for collaboration

Library podcasts offer at least two opportunities for collaboration. The first was brought up during our discussions on our study tour, when it was suggested that libraries could share their podcasts. The reasoning behind this suggestion was that a lot of the content of podcasts does not vary much between libraries. Most of the libraries have a podcast that discusses what a journal article is, or the importance of referencing in essays and assignments. These type of "generic" podcasts, which do not contain any information that is specific to a particular library or institution, would be suitable for sharing between libraries. In this way, libraries that wanted to offer podcasts to their users would be able to use existing resources, rather than having to develop their own.

The second opportunity for collaboration is concerned with the location of the podcasts on the website. As mentioned earlier, university students are keen users of podcasts of lectures and find them useful for study and revision purposes (Tynan & Colbran, 2006). We believe that this use of podcasts is used by libraries as evidence that these same students will listen to podcasts of library information.

One way to help promote the library to students would be to collaborate with university staff and place the library podcasts within the online course management software, e.g. Blackboard. Cebeci and Tekdal (2006) argue that podcasts should be treated as learning objects and designed in a way that allows them to be included in learning management systems. This could be a way to increase the use of the library podcasts and introduce the students to
the services and resources offered by the library.

However, the key difference between lecture podcasts and library podcasts is that the students can see how the lectures will help them. They need to listen to them in order to pass their courses. Would they place the same importance on library podcasts? Is the library seen by students as a key component of their success at university?

**Staff development**

An important factor that should be acknowledged is the benefits to library staff who were involved in the production of podcasts. From our discussions, podcasts were seen as an opportunity to introduce staff to Web 2.0 technology. Several libraries we spoke to were completing, or had completed, the "23 Things" Web 2.0 training program. Details of this program can be found at http://plcmclearning.blogspot.com. This is a benefit of developing podcasts in that it gives staff exposure to these new technologies and an opportunity to experiment with them. Staff would also become more confident with using technology, which would be transferred to their everyday working life. They also gained an insight into the technologies that clients are interacting with.

In eight out of the nine libraries that we consulted, podcasts were created by a team of staff. Often there were staff from different departments involved in the process. This meant that there had to be intra- and inter-departmental cooperation and teamwork, which was beneficial to individual staff, as well as the library as a whole.

MUL is introducing staff development opportunities related to new technologies. The Library IT department will be introducing a virtual "sandpit" for staff. This will allow staff to install and experiment with new software in an...
environment where there is no risk to network performance or stability.

The Information Access department will provide staff with "Exploration Time" away from their regular jobs to experiment with a new technology, software, or idea. These need not be a formal project such as the Eoin H. Wilkinson Grant, but will be an opportunity for staff to gain exposure to and learn about new technologies.

**Issues surrounding podcasts in libraries**

The issues which emerged surrounding podcasts fell into three broad areas - the planning process, focussing on clients, and the evaluation of new services.

*Planning the implementation*

The nine libraries that we spoke to were "early adopters" of podcasts. They were enthusiastic about the technology, and were willing to take risks and introduce podcasts into the Australian library environment. Because they were among the early adopters of library podcasts in Australia, they were in a situation where they had to experiment with the technology and the content that could be included. This ensured that the podcasts were rapidly made available for client use.

Eight of the nine libraries focussed their planning on the production process i.e. writing, recording, and posting the podcasts. However, only one of the nine libraries had consulted with their clients, as part of the planning process, with regard to possible topics and content.

Client needs should be the driver for change, not technology. As emphasised by Read (2007, p. A34) "A recording of a great lecture doesn't do much good if students don't listen to it. Any college planning a podcasting venture must
make sure that its public face is one that students will be likely to use." Although this statement was made in relation to the recording and podcasting of lectures, it would also apply to library podcasts. Podcasts were seen as an innovative technology which libraries felt they needed to introduce in order to keep up with the way their clients were using technology. "Libraries have jumped on a variety of bandwagons, particularly technological ones in an effort to show innovation and cement a place in the new world (Bosanquet, 2007, The Academic Library, para. 11). Innovation is all well and good, but there should be some evidence supporting the innovation, rather than innovation occurring for innovation's sake. Innovative projects create a bias which means that they are prone to always being seen as having a positive outcome, so they should always be examined critically and their sustainability should be ensured (Booth, 2002 cited in Koufogiannakis, 2007). The opportunity should always be taken to learn from what others have done (Koufogiannakis, 2007).

It is widely agreed that one of the first steps that should be undertaken whenever a new service is introduced is planning. The implementation of podcasts would require several variables to be determined e.g. the hardware and software which would be used for recording and editing, who would read the scripts, the length and structure of each recording, how many would be produced, the topics to be covered.

Definite planning is essential in developing such a project. This implies that goals and objectives must be set. Plans are then generated to reach these goals and objectives while perpetual measuring of results and evaluation of success are performed during the operation period. Consequently, planning is a continuous process which is focussed on future implications generated from present decisions (de Kock, 1998, para. 3).
If the planning process is inadequate, there is a risk that the project will not meet expectations, and staff time and effort will have been expended for no return. The introduction of a Web 2.0 technology into a library should be considered in the same way as any other new or modified service (Stephens, 2007b).

**Maintaining a focus on clients**

The whole purpose behind libraries is to serve their community of users. If the needs of the users are not being met, users will go elsewhere and the library will become irrelevant. Therefore, any new service should always be developed with the needs of the library's clients in mind. It should not be implemented simply because the service has been introduced by other libraries. Those libraries have a different community of users with different needs, so what works for them may not work for everyone. As Kajewski (2007, p. 428) points out "It is important to research the technologies available to you and creatively use the technologies to better serve the needs of your users by providing simple access to what they want, when they want it and how they want it”.

The research aspect mentioned by Kajewski is one area that appears to be currently missing with regards to podcasts in libraries in Australia. None of the libraries we consulted included their clients in the decision-making process in regards to the introduction of podcasts. It was assumed that library clients would listen to the podcasts.

Although the current generation of Australian university students are keen owners of MP3 players (Kennedy, Krause, Judd, Churchward, & Gray, 2006) and will use them to download lectures (Tynan & Colbran, 2006), this does not mean that they will eagerly wait for the next instalment of the library podcast. As Kennedy and colleagues (2006) indicate
there is an inherent assumption that because students are using particular technologies in their everyday lives this warrants their use in teaching and learning. However, it is unclear whether students want their 'everyday technologies' to be adopted or appropriated as 'learning technologies'. Moreover, it is not clear that emerging technologies and students' everyday skills with them will easily translate into beneficial technology-based learning (p. 4).

Assumptions were made about what topics to cover in the podcasts. None of the libraries we consulted held formal discussions with their clients about the topics that they would like covered in a podcast. Instead, the librarians used the material that is traditionally covered in presentations, training sessions and library tours as content for the podcasts.

One of the benefits of using audio to communicate information is that it is a very suitable medium for short, factual pieces of information. Information which is complex or requires substantial processing by the listener should not be communicated via audio (Lee & Chan, 2007). All the podcasts (with the exception of self-guided tours) tended to be short i.e. under 5 minutes.

As a profession we need to move away from the idea that we automatically know what our clients want. As Woodward (2005, p. 45) puts it "we do not and never will know our users better than they know themselves". Rather than jumping in and rolling out a new service, libraries would be better off asking their clients what they want, and determining if it is worthwhile implementing the new service.

One library which we spoke to provided book reviews by library staff as podcasts. These seemed to be far more popular than any of the podcasts which provided library information. This may be an indication that users do not want to use podcasts for library information, but prefer to listen to podcasts which...
are entertaining and of interest rather than informative. The libraries we consulted suggested one of the reasons for offering podcasts was that clients could listen to them anywhere. More research is needed to determine whether or not the information that libraries are providing via podcasts is conducive to "anywhere, anytime" listening. Are students more likely to listen to a podcast about what a journal is, or their favourite music whilst on the bus?

**Evaluating new services**

Evaluation and review should be included as one of the key components of any proposed service implementation, as discussed by Booth (2007, p. 301) "Only by putting in place mechanisms for capturing evaluative data as we introduce new technologies will we provide others with the opportunity to build upon what we are currently learning." If the service is not evaluated, there is no way of knowing whether or not it is useful for clients.

The service should be evaluated from the user's point of view, to ensure that their needs are being met. As noted by Hernon and Altman (1998, p. 7) "Sometimes the priorities of the library and those of its customers are not the same. However, if the library is to serve the interests of its customers, their preferences deserve serious consideration."

Three of the libraries we spoke to were proposing to do a review of their podcasts, now that they had been available for six months or more. These three libraries indicated that one area they will be examining is the location of podcasts on the library’s website. Currently, the most common approach (adopted by all eight academic libraries) is to put all the podcasts on one page. Two of the libraries we spoke to are now considering whether the podcasts should be integrated with other web resources e.g. putting a podcast discussing EndNote bibliographic management software on the library's
EndNote page. The rationale behind this was that it may make it easier for clients to find all the help that is available, as all the resources relating to a particular area are located together.

As well as looking at quantitative data, such as the number of downloads, the clients should be asked for their opinion in order to gather qualitative data on how useful and effective the podcasts have been. This lack of qualitative data is a widespread problem with regards to podcasts being offered by libraries. However, we acknowledge that it takes time and resources to gather this data.

There is very little literature on the evaluation of the effectiveness of podcasts in providing library information. Although most libraries provide a feedback mechanism, the amount of feedback received has been generally positive. However, the proportion of podcast users who submit feedback is very low. Out of all of the nine libraries, a total of 46 clients have provided feedback, despite the total number of downloads of podcasts from all nine libraries being in the tens of thousands. Does the fact that someone downloaded a podcast necessarily mean that they listened to the entire podcast?

In this time of limited budgets, libraries should be ensuring that they are getting value for money from their services. Although podcasts are seen as an inexpensive way of providing another avenue for clients to access library information, they do not come without costs. The hardware required to create podcasts is commonly available in the library, and "The only cost to your library to create a basic podcast is staff time" (Kajewski, 2007, p. 425). However, the cost of this staff time may not be insignificant.

Based on our discussions with staff in libraries which had produced podcasts, the average podcast takes approximately 10 hours to produce. This includes writing and editing the script, recording and editing the audio, and placing the file on the website. Most of the staff involved in this process would be on a
salary of approximately $25 per hour. Therefore each podcast would cost $250 per staff member. To produce 20 podcasts per year (10 per academic semester) would cost the library $5,000 for each staff member involved. This may turn out to be less expensive than other forms of providing information e.g. face-to-face training, however there is no measure of its effectiveness.

Perhaps libraries would be better off spending some of this money on developing a pilot project. This project could include a limited number of podcasts (with topics chosen by potential users), and evaluation of the podcasts by users. There is also the possibility of collaborating with other libraries.

The future of podcasts at Macquarie University Library

Now that we have completed this project, our position on introducing podcasts at MUL has changed. When the project began, we both felt that MUL was falling behind in our service delivery, as there were a number of other libraries who were creating podcasts, and had been doing so for at least 12 months. As "Australia's Innovative University" there was a feeling that we were not being innovative unless we began to adopt Web 2.0 technologies.

Based on the literature and the discussions that we have had, our recommendation will be that MUL does not develop podcasts at this point in time. We believe that there is simply not enough qualitative evidence to support their introduction.

We acknowledge the important role played by early adopters of new technology. They have led the way in introducing new technologies into the library environment. Libraries are now able to build on their work, and develop planning and evaluation frameworks that allow the cycle of quality enhancement to continue.
Until the evidence base to support the podcasting of library information has grown, we do not anticipate we will be going down this path. We will be proposing that MUL can make a more timely and valuable contribution to the field of library podcasting by researching and trialing evaluative tools to gather qualitative evidence on client needs and usage of Web 2.0 technologies in the library context. MUL would like to position itself as a library which practices evidence based library and information practice (EBLIP).

[EBLIP] seeks to improve library and information services and practice by bringing together the best available evidence and insights derived from working experience, moderated by user needs and preferences. EBLIP involves asking answerable questions, finding, critically appraising and then utilising research evidence from relevant disciplines in daily practice. It thus attempts to integrate user-reported, practitioner-observed and research-derived evidence as an explicit basis for decision-making. (Booth, 2006, p. 65)


Conclusion

Despite the fact that there has been very little investigation into whether or not podcasts are useful to library clients, the widespread use of podcasts by libraries to provide information continues. The development of the podcasts in the nine libraries we spoke to would appear to have been based largely on assumptions, and little evidence has been gathered to determine if users find the podcasts beneficial. The evidence base needs to be developed to justify the use of podcasts for providing library information.

The library podcasts that have been prepared are providing an overview of the
library, mixed with short snippets of information. This is an appropriate use of audio for learning, as it is best suited to short pieces of information. The technical aspects of creating a podcast have been established, and the content creation process is becoming less onerous. However, it appears as though the collection of feedback and evaluation of the service needs further development.

We are not saying that libraries should not develop podcasts for use by their clients. What we are saying is that libraries should try and look beyond the hype which surrounds many of the Web 2.0 technologies, and gather evidence before implementing a new service. The popularity of podcasts has certainly increased over the past two years or so. If they are to have a future in libraries, and not be considered a passing fad, the evidence for their effectiveness needs to be critically evaluated.

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