Colloquium

Multimedia-casting syndication for educational purposes Considerations of a Podcast for use in higher education

Gregory O'Toole, M. A.

Gregory O'Toole is an adjunct professor and a media investigator. For more information on his work, visit http://www.quantumedia.org or http://www.radio-qmx.org. Address for correspondence: Gregory O'Toole, MA, Office 265CA, 2255 E Evans Ave, University of Denver, Denver, CO 80208. Tel: 720-232-8066; email: gotoole@du.edu

Introduction

A month ago the papers on Harvard Law's Podcast came across my desk as they were floating about the Educational Technology office suite here in the law school at the University of Denver. Having already implemented my own brand of multimedia documentary syndication, coined *Quantumedia*, on my personal site, http://www.gregory-otoole.com, I jumped at the chance to build something new and exciting—and highly useable—for the Sturm College of Law.

First, my explanation of *Quantumedia* (communication theory) should be clarified as: (1) the philosophical pursuit of the fundamental unit of electromagnetic energy; (2) multi/new media documentation; and (3) creative format critical analysis of one's immediate surroundings, their environment, socio-global issues.

My media theory work is a continuous effort of innovative cultural documentation with an emphasis on the very media through which the work is influenced, created and transmitted. Considering the historic facts of my field of research, starting in the 1950s media theorist Marshall McLuhan held that 'media are an extension of our selves'. If this is true, and I believe it to be, we can further his theory, and posit that 'the self can be a medium in turn'. This ongoing process of life witnessed (documented) 'through the eyes' of various new media is what I refer to as *The Quantumedia Experiment*.

Mine is an ontological perspective on the concept of 'life as art'. My work, then, is a philosophical pursuit of the fundamental unit of the life energy we know, that of electromagnetism, at the quantum level. A poetics of experience. The veritably abstract. Works that fall into such a category are not necessarily individualised creative works of any particular medium, nor are they the medium itself, as McLuhan also held in his widely popularised theory 'the medium is the message'... but, perhaps, the event of life itself as the work of art.

The Law Media and Podcast Forum 2.0

At first the staff of the Educational Technology department only had in mind to create a space that would make available to all of the faculty an xml document formatted in RSS 2.0, essentially, and a location where students could use that document's URL to subscribe to that particular course's Podcast. The files were to be all audio as in what is 'conventionally' done in a Podcast. However, like technology itself, that idea changed very rapidly. The simple audio Podcast was quickly summoned to allow for video capabilities as well as for a slew of other customisable features. It still evolves today.

The home for this online application is one application in itself (http://law.du.edu/podcast/podcast_signin.cfm; http://www.law.du.edu/podcast/). The student, or end-user, side of the application is simply an online environment where the students can find and subscribe to their specific needs, as well as find other information to get them started on and about Podcasting.

Audio Podcast

A Coldfusion form is used to sign in to the Law Media & Podcast Forum Manager 2.0. A drop-down menu is made available that is populated by the names of all database tables that can be used with the Manager. One (Microsoft Access Database) table has been previously assigned to each professor's course or admin for the programme. A Coldfusion form is used to collect information for each Podcast (Title, Description, Length, File, Type, etc.) that will be used to populate the xml page. (See example below for proper iTunes RSS 2.0 formats. Others available online.) The data from the form collects into the designated database table; the mp3 file is uploaded to the server; the xml file is dynamically generated in RSS 2.0 format for use in all updated 'feed catchers', especially, the popular iTunes brand. This xml file is written to the server in the proper directory after being generated. This allows for the updated Podcast to be always available. Shown here is a thumbnail screen capture of iTunes being used to subscribe to the Law Media & Podcast 2.0. Personal mp3 players synced up with your feed catcher allow for convenience and portability.

Video-cast

Once success was had with the audio-based syndication, naturally the desire arose for video. University of Denver Sturm Law Professor David Thomson played a major role in motivating this particular functionality. In the end, it was decided that sticking with the original format was best suited for all those involved; the Manager was easy to use and it worked well, and the subscription site was functioning properly and was convenient for the user. One major alteration was made when we ran into an issue with file size (of the videos).

The Audio/Visual (AV) Department here has always handled recordings of lectures and class material. This, eventually, was found to be the answer to our file size dilemma. Since AV had the original video files for the Video-cast, they did not necessarily need to upload the files, as much as tell the xml document where those files were located. Problem solved. The administrator, then, formatting a new Video-cast would simply use

the 'Video File Path' field that I inserted here to enter the URL path to that particular file. And, since Wayne Rust, the AV Manager already had the files on the web server, and had converted them into the proper format to play on a Video iPod (many commercial applications available on the market), it was very easy for him to copy and paste that URL.

Reflections

The world of Podcasting is evolving rapidly. Just yesterday I was sent an article about Apple's amendment to its software phenomenon iTunes[TM]. The improvement that was featured in the article was Apple's new iTunes U[TM]. The idea with iTunes U[TM] is to expand on its Podcasting capabilities and offer those conveniences in technology to the teaching and learning environment. I was pleased to realise that the Educational Technology department at the University of Denver had already built, tested and released our own customised version of this same concept in a neatly packaged online application. In the fields of communication technology and digital media, I have found, especially in higher education, that customisation is most important to the full realisation of an applications success. Sometimes the small, changeable features are what will make or break your ideas.