

## Podcast: Sound emission, future of radio and cyberculture

*Podcast: Emissão de som, futuro do rádio e cibercultura*

*Podcast: Emisión de sonido, futuro de la radio y cibercultura*

André Lemos

### Abstract

In his "theories of radio" from 1932, Brecht sought to transform the radio into a bi-directional communication instrument, making each listener a producer of information. Brecht wanted a "rebellion on the part of the eye, his activation and rehabilitation as a producer." For the German playwright, "broadcasting must consequently be separated from those who supply it and constitute its listeners as suppliers." His dream, his utopia of rehabilitating listeners as producers, seems to come true with the global phenomenon of podcasts. Although it is not like the radio we know today, with centralized broadcasting and massive broadcasting of streaming programs, podcasting uses the format and metaphor to make anyone a producer of sound emissions. This is yet another expression of cyberculture as liberation from the emission pole.

**Keywords:** Podcast; Radio; Cyberculture.

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### Bio

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### Resumo

Nas suas "teorias da rádio" de 1932, Brecht procurava transformar a rádio num instrumento de comunicação bidirecional, fazendo de cada ouvinte um produtor de informação. Brecht queria uma "rebelião do olho, a sua ativação e reabilitação como produtor". Para o dramaturgo alemão, "a radiodifusão deve, por conseguinte, ser separada daqueles que a fornecem e constituir os seus ouvintes como fornecedores". O seu sonho, a sua utopia de reabilitar os ouvintes como produtores, parece tornar-se realidade com o fenómeno global dos podcasts. Embora não se assemelhe à rádio que conhecemos hoje, com emissão centralizada e difusão massiva de programas em streaming, o podcasting usa o formato e a metáfora para fazer de qualquer pessoa um produtor de emissões sonoras. Esta é mais uma expressão da cibercultura como libertação do pólo de emissão.

**Palavras-chave:** Podcast; Rádio; Cibercultura.

### Resumen

En sus "teorías de la radio" de 1932, Brecht pretendía transformar la radio en un instrumento de comunicación bidireccional, haciendo de cada oyente un productor de información. Brecht quería una "rebelión del ojo, su activación y rehabilitación como productor". Para el dramaturgo alemán, "la radiodifusión debe, en consecuencia, separarse de quienes la suministran y constituir a sus oyentes en proveedores". Su sueño, su utopía de rehabilitar a los oyentes como productores, parece hacerse realidad con el fenómeno global de los podcasts. Aunque no se parece a la radio que conocemos hoy, con emisión centralizada y difusión masiva de programas en streaming, el podcasting utiliza el formato y la metáfora para convertir a cualquiera en productor de emisiones sonoras. Es una expresión más de la cibercultura como liberación del polo de emisión.

**Palabras clave:** Podcast; Radio; Cibercultura.

## Introduction

The production and dissemination system of sound content known as podcasts emerged at the end of 2004. The name is a neologism of the terms "iPod" (Apple MP3 player) and "broadcasting" (transmission, large-scale information dissemination system). The term does not seem very good since an iPod is unnecessary (any MP3 player will do), and it is not broadcast, but what we

can call webcast. Wikipedia defines podcasting as "a method of publishing sound files to the Internet, allowing users to subscribe to a feed and receive new audio files automatically. Podcasting is distinct from other types of audio content delivery because it uses the RSS 2.0 file format. This technique has enabled many producers to create self-published, syndicated radio shows."<sup>2</sup>

The podcast is thus a system for producing and disseminating sound files similar to the format of radio programs. The system works as follows: with a home computer equipped with a microphone and sound editing software, the user records a program (about whatever he wants), saves it as a sound file (MP3, for example), and then makes it available on sites that are indexed in RSS (Really Simple Syndication) aggregators<sup>3</sup>. The user downloads the file to their computer and then to their MP3 player. The system, created by former American MTV VJ Adam Curry, presupposes the complete production and distribution chain. Podcasting is a set of technologies for producing and distributing sound content. As in other forms of information production in cyberculture, copyright problems arise (use of music in podcasts, for example). What would be interesting would be the emergence of programs with usage licenses of the "Creative Commons" type that would guarantee the rights and possibilities of free use of the content produced<sup>4</sup>. Few podcasts use this license.

The phenomenon is recent but proliferating. In less than six months, we can already find more than 4,940,000 references to the word podcasting on Google. It is estimated that there are more than 6 million users of the system in the world. In Brazil, podcasts began to emerge in 2005, and today, we can count a few dozen and are also experiencing geometric growth<sup>5</sup>. Research carried out by Forrester estimates that there will be, by the end of the year, more than 300,000

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Podcasting>.

<sup>3</sup> RSS uses XML technology. About XML, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/XML>. Some available aggregators are Doppler, iPodder, and FeedDemon.

<sup>4</sup> See [http://www.siliconvalleywatcher.com/mt/archives/2005/03/why\\_your\\_podcas.php](http://www.siliconvalleywatcher.com/mt/archives/2005/03/why_your_podcas.php). About Creative Commons, see <http://creativecommons.org/>.

<sup>5</sup> For podcasts around the world see: <http://news.softpedia.com/news/Does-Podcast-have-6-million-users-1004.shtml>.

podcasts and, by 2009, 13 million.

There are several podcasts, most themed: technology, art, culture, economy, news, literature, music. An interesting example is "Sound Seeing," where people create unofficial museum tours. You can download the itinerary, put it on your MP3 player, and visit it listening to unofficial guides<sup>6</sup>. Another exciting experience is that of the BBC, which created "BBC Radio Podcasts" with more than 20 programs available. In this case, it is a reaction and a recognition of the importance of new media by a broadcasting giant<sup>7</sup>. Commercial radio stations are already looking for ways to make money from podcasts. Religious people also use technology with "Godcasts," religious podcasts used by different cults (Catholic, Jewish, Buddhist) to maintain contact and increase the number of believers. The range of options is growing and quite diverse in terms of themes, countries, or languages.

### **Release of sound emissions**

It seems that what is at stake with this expression of cyberculture is the redefinition of the massive cultural industry itself, in this case, the reconfiguration of "radio." The question that always arises (with open journalism, blogs, free software, etc.) is whether or not we are facing the creation of a new genre of production, communication, and publication processes. Can we call "radio" MP3 files, in radio broadcast format, recorded by anyone and made available on the Internet through blogs and RSS systems to transmit to a group of subscribers? We can argue the same concerning virtual diaries (diaries?) or online newspapers (newspapers?). The analogy is with the mass media radio, but wouldn't it be just another metaphor?

The cover story of Wired magazine in March 2005 read, "The end of radio (as we know it)." The magazine referred to new radio broadcasting systems, including podcasts. Here, we deal with a double error expected in the hastiest

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<sup>6</sup><http://www.nytimes.com/2005/05/28/arts/design/28podc.html?ex=1274932800&en=db1c6d7073dccc036&ei=5088&partner=rssnyt&emc=rss>. See also [http://mod.blogs.com/art\\_mobs/](http://mod.blogs.com/art_mobs/).

<sup>7</sup> About the BBC see <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/4575075.stm>.

analyses of cyberculture: 1. the end of the analog and mass medium and 2. its replacement by a digital and personalized one. First, it is not the end of radio as a means of communication. The podcast only adds to the various broadcasting formats. Second, it is not the end of radio as we know it today, in its AM and FM formats. We are seeing a media reconfiguration in which both structures remain and have their user niches secured. It is great to download a program à la carte and listen to a massive program in the car or the commentary of football games in stadiums in real-time with a battery-powered radio. Users have different roles, functions, and media practices. It is not a matter of replacing one format with another, as the two systems meet non-competing needs: mass radio puts the listener in tune with a collective sphere; personalized broadcasting allows choices according to personal taste, in addition to controlling the space and time of listening.

Here, we arrive at the heart of one of the laws of cyberculture: the logic of reconfiguration. The various contemporary phenomena are not about the extinction or annihilation of formats and media. The current revolution in sound emission through digital technology and telematic networks will not make mass radio (AM or FM, even if the form of emission is digital) disappear. We could even think of a player connected directly to the Internet. In that case, wouldn't we return to streaming current AM/FM radio stations? In the case of mass radio broadcasting and à la carte podcast broadcasting, there remains a desire for personalization and customization that both models offer to enrich the contemporary communication landscape. The issue is complex and requires thinking that does not work through exclusion but through addition. The logic of cyberculture is not the "or" but the "and."

This cultural environment effectively involves releasing the emission pole. In current cyberculture, blogs, thematic forums, peer-to-peer file exchange systems, free software, podcasts, social software like Orkut, and many other contemporary practices attest to this hypothesis. The supposed excess of information is the emergence of different voices expressing themselves on various subjects and in different formats distributed worldwide. Another

important characteristic in question is the principle of connection, the sharing of experiences, files, and software across networks. We are seeing this tripod in action with podcasts: 1. liberation of the emission pole (producer listener), 2. connection principle: distribution through indexing of sites on the network (RSS) in planetary connection, and 3. reconfiguration of emission formats of sound content (in two poles: "do it yourself" your radio; and mass radio stations creating podcasting programs, like the BBC).

If he were alive, Brecht could offer us a podcast of his, allowing each user to listen to readings of his plays or great playwrights. Alternatively, he would be delighted to see his utopia realized in the current sound broadcast of podcasts, where those who were just listeners become producers of information. Cyberculture makes each receiver (spectator, listener, reader) a potential information producer, making the contemporary communication environment more complex.

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