

## Podcasting and cultural consumption

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Gisela G. S. Castro

### Abstract

This paper discusses podcasting and its implications within the emergence of new forms of content production and consumption in cyberculture. As we reflect upon the effects of digital media in ongoing modifications in human sensibility and cognition, the article examines the uses of podcasting, from producers', users', and sponsors' points of view. It analyzes possible continuities and discontinuities with traditional media, as well as specific aspects that contribute to consolidate the growing popularity of podcasts in the contemporary cultural scene.

**Keywords:** Communication and media studies; Cyberculture; Cultural consumption; Podcasting.

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### Resumo

Este artigo discute o podcasting e suas implicações no surgimento de novas formas de produção e consumo de conteúdo na cibercultura. Ao refletirmos sobre os efeitos da mídia digital nas modificações em curso na sensibilidade e na cognição humanas, o artigo examina os usos do podcasting, do ponto de vista dos produtores, usuários e patrocinadores. Ele analisa possíveis continuidades e discontinuidades com a mídia tradicional, bem como aspectos específicos que contribuem para consolidar a crescente popularidade dos podcasts no cenário cultural contemporâneo.

**Palavras-chave:** Estudos de comunicação e mídia; Cibercultura; Consumo cultural; Podcasting.

### Resumen

Este artículo analiza el podcasting y sus implicaciones dentro de la emergencia de nuevas formas de producción y consumo de contenidos en la cibercultura. Al reflexionar sobre los efectos de los medios digitales en las modificaciones en curso de la sensibilidad y la cognición humanas, el artículo examina los usos del podcasting, desde los puntos de vista de productores, usuarios y patrocinadores. Analiza posibles continuidades y discontinuidades con los medios tradicionales, así como aspectos específicos que contribuyen a consolidar la creciente popularidad de los podcasts en el panorama cultural contemporáneo.

**Palabras clave:** Estudios sobre comunicación y medios de comunicación; Cibercultura; Consumo cultural; Podcasting.

## To get started

The Internet is today one of the most important global communication tools. The space-time compression provided by the almost instantaneous nature of electronic flows favours the establishment of significant new practices and experiments in the context that is conventionally called cyberculture (LEMOS, 2002; LÉVY, 1999; RÜDIGER, 2002). Podcasting, as focused on this article, presents itself as a typical phenomenon of the current phase of cyberculture. This article aims to examine this nascent practice, considering the set of possible ongoing transformations in the modes of listening and cultural consumption.

In the seminal text “The work of art in the era of its technical reproducibility”, Walter Benjamin provides important elements for understanding the experience related to cultural products that came to typify mass culture. In this study, the youngest member of the Frankfurt School finds that the increasing mediation of audio-visuals would be giving rise to a notable reconfiguration in our perceptual schemes. Understanding perception as the basis of the cognitive system, today we can point to the complex resonances arising from the perceptual transformations operated by digital media.

We have learned from McLuhan (1992) that media participate in the configuration of users' cognitive schemes. We know that our subjectivities have come to be constituted largely by the media. Likewise, we are aware that the development of media is directly linked to the different modes of social appropriation to which they are subject (CASTELLS, 2003). Considering them as an integral part of social modelling mechanisms, we avoid the mistake of reifying them and incurring in technological determinism. It is important here to observe the role played by information and communication technologies in the set of subjective modulation devices with which we interact in a daily basis.

As André Lemos (2002: 113) observes, “technologies deeply mark the entire social body through modes of production and consumption, forms of communication and the normalization of social life”. Due to the permanent process of negotiation between old and new technologies that characterize contemporary urban culture, it is worth noting that I do not usually adopt substantive views that think of cyberculture in rupture with the historical-social process that precedes the emergence of new information and communication technologies.

A more detailed analysis of the transformations in the forms of listening brought about by the arrival of technologies such as the telephone, the phonograph, and the microphone, for example, can be found in my previous work (CASTRO, 2003). For the purposes of the discussion intended here, it is mandatory to highlight the important reconfiguration of the senses amid the intense modification of the means of production, distribution and consumption

that mark post-industrial capitalist cultures.

Taking music as an object of investigation in the analysis of transformations in the modes of listening, although the experience of listening to live performances has not lost its importance, recordings have for decades stopped being considered minor or inauthentic and are even taken as raw material for music production of certain current musical genres such as, for example, hip hop and electronic music. In fact, since the second half of the last century, the boom in the recording industry, encouraged by different media and favoured by the blatant miniaturization of sound systems, has made the practice of listening to music increasingly widespread in the daily lives of large portions of populations of the planet. At the same time, the omnipresence of mobile phones and ear/headphones stands out, as well as the most varied portable devices that have been incorporated as part of today's urban outfits. Finally, the ubiquity of powerful sound systems in cars and homes redesigns the sound ambiance as well as our forms of listening.

The plasticity of digital technologies and the possibilities opened up by micro informatics have contributed to changing the ways of listening even more radically by blurring the boundaries between consumers and producers, authors and editors, listeners and distributors, original and copy. In this sense, it is important to discuss the influential presence of digital media as vectors in the constitution of new practices of cultural production and consumption, as well as their contribution to an eventual reconfiguration of the current sensorium and urban imagination.

In this scenario, digital cell phones and portable MP3 players stand out, including the well-known iPod. Earphones and headphones have long immersed listeners in personalized, exclusive acoustic environments. New generations of cell phones are configured as multifunctional devices that are becoming instruments of digital inclusion. The reduced cost of these devices compared to that of a personal computer means they can function as entry points for many users who previously did not have access to the Internet (PELLANDA, 2005), having added a plethora of additional functions to telephony. Moreover, portable

players allow users to access their private music collections, now measured in gigabytes, anytime and anywhere.

### **About iPods and podcasting**

A device like the iPod can be used with earphones or connected to a car's sound system, for example. In both cases, it functions as a portable, private radio station. In addition to music tracks, one can also stock and listen to podcast programs, audio blogs that are beginning to proliferate very quickly on the web. Apple's iTunes has helped make podcasting popular by incorporating aggregator software into its latest versions. They organize podcast content, in addition to making a catalogue of the most popular podcasts available as of May, 2005.

Podcasting (the word joins together *iPod* and *broadcasting*) works as a (generally free) subscription system, in which tracking and automatic updating software (which operates by the RSS system – really simple syndication, already used for text files) ensures that the user is always up to date with new releases. A computer aficionado and former MTV VJ, Englishman Adam Curry, nicknamed as the “*podfather*”, stands out as one of the best-known pioneers. This practice has already left the underground and is quickly gaining mainstream cyberculture. The rapid proliferation of podcasting is credited to the support given by Apple's all-powerful Steve Jobs, who has described this new medium as the “radio of the future” (NUCCI, 2005).

The iPod has become a must by bringing together some obsessions of contemporary consumption, such as the fascination with the exclusive, bold, up-to-date design, miniaturization (portability) and the power of the gigabyte. In fact, “being up to date” with cutting-edge products whose storage capacities would have seemed absurd until recently has become highly valued in today's social imagination. In an environment where consumption functions as an important social encoder, the acquisition of products that project an image of high status is well-regarded (ROCHA, 2004; McCRACKEN, 2003). In this sense, it is exemplary that a company like BMW has been the first to offer to select clientele the

connection of the iPod to the car radio, straight from the factory. Today, as this technology is beginning to be copied by other car manufacturers, it continues to innovate by offering podcasting as a means of direct connection between any two different BMWs.

Although podcasting is not exclusive to the iPod, and can be downloaded to personal computers, laptops, notebooks, palms and other types of portable devices apart from the various Apple models, it can be understood as a product of the new phase of cyberculture, marked by the mobility of wireless technologies. The practice of blogs and photologs is already well-established. Through these personalized content pages, new forms of sociability come to the fore, with interactivity being favoured when recipients are encouraged to post their comments and impressions, providing a more direct exchange between (blog) authors and their audience. In the corporate environment, it appears that several companies have come adopt the format to establish more agile communication with suppliers and customers.

Audio blogs dispense with large radio studios and complex technical mainframes to enable their production. They can be dedicated, for example, to certain subgenres of music, minority niches of consumption that do not usually find space in the mass programming of commercial radio stations. In this scenario, rare musical files can now be made available in MP3 format and transmitted as a podcast, by using the RSS subscription system. In these cases, the author can be called a Web DJ, with the repertoire as one of the trademarks of the best DJs, whatever medium they work with.

In addition to music programs, there are also podcasts on specific topics such as wine, cinema, politics, etc. Some traditional radio programs are now also being offered as podcasts. In this case, the Internet is used as an alternative distribution channel in order to captivate new listeners. The BBC was one of the pioneers in the new format, betting on the viability of commercial podcasting. Some Brazilian radio stations are also experimenting with the new format. Podcasting works in a similar way to net radios or satellite radios. The main difference is in the distribution system, through RSS subscriptions. This

innovation in a way reverses the direction of the characteristic flow of mass media: one → many. In this technology, content is “pulled” by the subscriber instead of being “pushed” towards them in an open distribution channel. The content you receive is the complete program, or the complete episode of that program; something you can save to listen to whenever and wherever you wish.

It is also worth remembering that, unlike what happens with radio frequencies, there is no regulation, nor the official concession of a channel for podcasting transmissions. In less than a year after its launch, podcasting has quickly spread from the Vatican to Nasa and the pop scene. Nowadays there are countless supporters of this new method of generating and distributing content on the Web.

Among the most interesting uses of podcasting, we can highlight guided tours in museums and cultural centers. In addition to official tours already produced on podcasts with institutional approval, alternative, unauthorized versions are posted on the web by art teachers or students who offer their comments on podcasts (KENNEDY, 2005). Digital personal trainers can also be singled out among the countless other types of podcasting available on the Internet. These are podcasts programmed with music, messages of encouragement and guidance aimed at those who practice physical activities during their exercise sessions. Such programs can also include small commercial spots related to the fitness market, such as advertisements for energy drinks or cereal bars. Finally, if audiobooks have not yet become the commercial success they promised to be, it seems likely that we will soon engage with on demand dramatized readings of the most varied titles, in podcast format...

### **Podcasting in the blogosphere**

Podcasting seems to be in line with the main characteristics of what has come to be known as the “blogosphere”. Its practicality, informality, spontaneity, and interactivity have led legions of internet users to decide to generate and distribute their own content. These can be made available as blogs, photologs,

audio logs and video logs open to public visitation. Tim Berners-Lee, the creator of the World Wide Web, considers that blogging realizes one of the most important vocations of the web, which is to bring together content generated by users themselves, and stimulating interactivity (LAWSON, 2005). The rapid growth of this type of practice seems to point to a certain exhaustion of more traditional and linear forms of communication in the classic one → many schemes. The de-centrality of the Web is often pointed out as one of its main differences in relation to other media. Due to its own mode of operation, each final pole can in theory function both as a receiving pole and as a content-emitting pole, generating a reticular flow from many to many (SODRÉ, 2002).

We understand it is naive to assume that there is a real and effective equivalence and interchangeability among senders and receivers in most of the ever-increasing number of nodes on the Web. Technical difficulties and precarious infrastructure contribute to alienating many potential users from online content generation. Limited familiarity with current informational languages makes it difficult to manage content generation software programs, even though they are becoming increasingly user-friendly. The high cost of access to broadband data transmission can also be a factor for keeping other potential candidates away from this practice. In the specific case of podcasting, although audio files are much less heavy than image files such as photos or videos, broadband is still necessary to facilitate and speed up downloading, as well as to enable the production and distribution of podcasts.

With all this, the number of followers of the blogosphere is growing exponentially, which is now also a means of business. It can be argued that the novelty-effect makes podcasting a more significant viral phenomenon. Among the countless examples of possible uses of this media modality, music bands use specialized portals as a more direct channel of contact with fans. They can make music tracks available in MP3 format for downloading or they can distribute this content through podcasts that fans receive directly on their own terminals. They can then carry the music in their pockets and listen to it anywhere and anytime they wish. Companies providing services for this recent industry have emerged.



They often combine the playful and social aspects with the commercial and corporate ones.

### **Podcasting while multi-tasking**

Podcasting is also especially attractive to a type of audience that has already become accustomed to what North American scholars call multi-tasking. This is a type of diffuse concentration that allows different tasks to be performed simultaneously. Listening to music, doing homework on the computer, texting with a friend online while speaking on the phone with someone else are common examples.

At the beginning of this discussion, I drew attention to the changes in perception triggered by audiovisual media, as pointed out by Walter Benjamin. Later, I argued about a possible reconfiguration of the sensorium and cognitive pattern being triggered by digital media. Multi-tasking seems to be a symptom of a cognitive change in which digital media can be seen as facilitators. By focusing primarily on listening – instead of viewing – podcasting leaves users free (at least in theory) to simultaneously perform different other tasks, such as jogging, driving a car, or washing dishes, for example.

Frequently highlighted in my work and previously mentioned in this brief article, the ubiquity of earphones also points to forms of listening compatible with this multifunctional type of cognition. It helps make listeners used to encapsulating themselves in individual, tailor-made sound environments as a backdrop for their different daily activities. In freeing vision for other tasks that are often performed simultaneously, podcasting can be understood within this same lineage of technologies that favour the customization of audio content.

### **Vlogs, vodcasting and the new iPod video**

In an extremely visual culture like ours, the appeal of the image is also available as an extension of listening. In the case of music, we have long lived with video clips, pioneered by the Beatles in the 1960s and transformed into an integral part of the main commercial releases from the eighties onwards. The

commercial success of MTV, whose programming was initially dedicated exclusively to music videos that became increasingly more elaborate, also points to an evident consolidation of the experience of “seeing” or “watching” music in media culture.

In peer-to-peer networks, countless users share audio, photo and video files. Two main factors have especially favoured the latter: on the one hand, the increasing growth in transmission bandwidth of data and, on the other hand, the emergence of compression formats that are increasingly effective in reducing file sizes, with little loss of quality.

Taking into consideration the production and sharing of personalized content in the “blogosphere”, the growing proliferation of digital cameras and webcams on the market has encouraged the creation of vlogs, or video logs. Working within the same principles as other types of blogs, this new format adds to the existing ones, the main difference being the offering of sequences of images recorded on video. For the ordinary user with no access to professional distribution schemes, this practice becomes viable as there are different types of open-source software that compress encrypted data and make it available for easier distribution in video podcasting. Aware of the news, the iTunes Music Store has started to offer music videos, TV shows and commercial movie trailers in video podcasting. The launch of the latest iPod model in October 2005 complements this novelty. Equipped with a high-resolution video screen, the newest iPod blends together the experiences of watching and listening to music. It also allows watching home movies and video podcasts. The distribution of commercial films via the Internet may eventually represent an important share of the movie market.

### **Podcasting as medium for business**

Nascent business models such as commercial sponsorship of the most popular podcasts (audio or video) point to possible commercial applications of podcasting technology. In this case, remuneration goes to those responsible for the programs, which can continue to be distributed free of charge or can be

purchased in virtual stores such as iTunes or the new Napster. These stores have contributed to making commercial downloading a habit. Together with paid subscription systems, they are “teaching” users on how to consume content legally sanctioned for distribution by the cultural industry.

Among the main attractions of this new media modality, on the user's side, personalized listening with on demand content served on their own player or terminal. This relieves users of the need to browse in search of content. On the producer's side, sharing is the cornerstone of cyberculture (see CASTRO, 2005b). Another plus is the possibility of your podcast generating income. For the sponsor or corporate producer, the strong audience segmentation, and the advantage of working with a subscription service by which customers receive the content they chose to receive, being able to listen to it whenever and wherever it suits them. This way, podcasts are free from spam, those unwanted messages commonly received in e-mail services. The idea is that podcast listeners are predisposed to willingly receive the content in their RSS feed, as they themselves had subscribed to this.

In the corporate world, podcasting is also starting to be used as a preferred technology for event coverage, for generating specific technical content used in various training programs inside and outside the company, as well as for internal communication. Specialized companies offer consultancy and services. Some also function as podcasting portals in many cases.

### **To wrap it up**

The growing prevalence of cyberspace in the daily lives of significant portions of populations, especially in urban centers, highlights the relevance of cyberculture studies. Knowing that cyberspace is an unstable, unpredictable scenario, rich in experimentation, it is worth emphasizing the decisive importance of the social appropriation of nascent technologies in the very constitution of new spheres of public and private life. In the general context of the psychosocial and sociocultural developments of new information and communication technologies, a context in which the topic of cybercities has been gaining

prominence, it is perhaps too hasty to attempt to draw conclusions about a media phenomenon such as podcasting, so recent in Brazil. This seems to be especially true as we think of the naively prescient prediction that podcasting would eventually replace traditional radio.

It seems more correct to think of podcasting as a “blogger” version of radio, as it offers customized content on demand. This is consistent with the trend of fine audience segmentation favoured by electronic media. Therefore, it is safer to say that podcasting can coexist side by side with radio as we know it, in the same way that electronic mail has not made traditional mail obsolete.

As for video podcasting, or vodcasting, I think its main attraction is that it is in sync with the trend towards democratization of content generation on the Web. Up until very recently, we were restricted to receiving and watching vodcasts only on computer screens. We did not yet have portability, an element that, as we have seen, has become a must in contemporary high-tech consumption. Recent launches such as the new iPod video seems to be tailored to meet this type of demand. Presented as “music for the eyes”, the latest member of the select and growing iPod ‘tribe’ seems to have everything it needs to become the new “darling” of wealthy hipsters. However, it is too early to speculate whether it will be adopted as a gadget with mass reach. Even more important for the purposes of the discussion proposed here: at the moment, it would be difficult to specify what role vodcasting will play among the ongoing transformations in the modes of perception and cognition.

The Internet was an eminently textual medium in its early days. It has become an environment where seeing (or watching) and listening increasingly meet up with reading and writing. To capture the ever-fleeting attention of Internet users, content is offered in attractive, palatable formats and in a friendly manner, without bothering users by requiring greater effort on their part. Furthermore, interactivity has the counterpart of encouraging cooperation. This is essential when we are faced with tasks of such complexity as to require distributed cognition between humans and machines, as well as among different individuals transformed into Web nodes (LÈVY, 1999; MARKOFF, 2005).

Consider the large number of dyslexic young people who have notorious difficulty mastering reading and writing, but usually obtain excellent results with keyboards, computer screens and electronic games. Consider the countless cases of attention deficit disorder (ADD) that inflate the most recent school statistics. We can speculate that these signs of greater changes in human sensitivity and cognition are being promoted by our intense coexistence with the electronic flows of digital media.

The rhythms of reading and writing differ from the immediacy of listening and watching. Listening and seeing are uninterrupted. Ear-brain and eye-brain associations work by means of perceptual cuts that are processed extremely quickly. Reading and writing use different brain areas and processes. They require complex integration among different cortical, motor and sensory structures. Perhaps, according to McLuhan's intuition, we are witnessing the decline of perceptual and cognitive models shaped by a long tradition of reading and writing. Audiovisual media may favor the emergence of new subjective configurations.

The undeniable plasticity of digital media and their strong tendency to move away from the initial textual model towards interactive audio-visual models seem to reinforce the primacy of seeing and hearing. Nevertheless, reading and writing continue to be highly valued culturally. Even though I concur with those who perceive and follow the changes taking place, I do not align myself with catastrophic visions that allude to unfathomable dangers, nor with the naive and uncritical hail of the blessings of the "new era" that is supposed to be unfolding.

Without offering stable certainties, nor hasty conclusions, this brief article focused on podcasting, analyzed in terms of the new forms of cultural consumption favoured by digital media. Our reflections aim to integrate this topic into discussions about technological mediations and transformations of the subjectivities that currently permeate the fascinating field of Communication and Media Studies.

## **A word from 2024**

This article was originally published in the early 2000s, when podcasts were still in their infancy in Brazil. As a scholar who is very much interested in digital audio formats, when I first heard about this new technology and its capacity to engage listeners and expand our listening experience in digital circuits, I immediately set off to try and learn more about this new type of audio blog. I sensed great potential in it to become something big in the fast-changing mediasphere. I wrote this article, hoping it would eventually reach other colleagues we could discuss this with.

From today's point of view, a lot of what I mentioned then is outdated or gone by now – like the iPod, for example. Nevertheless, podcasts still enjoy strong popularity among Brazilians. We are not only early adopters, but also heavy users, with the second largest market for downloads of podcast episodes, behind only the USA.

One thing that is clearly different is the fact we now have a much more consistent market for producing, storing, distributing, and monetizing podcasts in Brazil. This is especially true since the major media conglomerates joined the podcast ecosystem around 2019. Up until then, most podcasters worked independently, and they did not make money from their productions, even the very popular ones. As a result, many saw their activity as a mere hobby. Lacking a sustainable market to grow in, few of the early Brazilian podcasts remain. Those who are active can now enjoy an ecosystem that is clearly being consolidated, with many more opportunities for meaningful models of partnership agreements with media and tech conglomerates, as well as advertising agencies and commercial brands.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, with our lives disrupted by social distancing and other measures of sanitary caution, many of us worked and socialized online. Screens can be really tiring, so, in those days, podcasts were a major relief to many of us after a long day of work in front of the screens. People who had never subscribed or even listened to podcasts before those difficult years, resorted to

them for entertainment and information. Those who had already made it a habit of listening to podcasts on their commute to work and back, for example, had to find time to fit them into their new, homebound, busy schedules. Still, more and more people would talk about or read about podcasts in the media. This helped keep the technology going.

There are now countless podcasts and brilliant podcasters in Brazil (TIGRE, 2021). Their production ranges on a very big variety of topics, formats, types of language, aesthetics and so on. Some podcasts are conceived as round tables for public debate. Some tell stories – real or fictional ones, with true crimes being an especially popular genre. Some are built around interviews, others focus on news, or resort to specialists' insights. There are videocasts on YouTube. There are also podcasts made for internal marketing in sponsor companies.

Technology has advanced and it has become easier to produce, to distribute and to find to podcasts to engage with. Experts seem to agree that the days are over for the independent do-it-all lone podcaster. Serious effort is being made to render podcasts more and more well-regarded as promotional media, so as to make them profitable. With its own prizes, metrics, inventories, and varied forms of brand partnership, the podosphere is widely regarded as a promising lucrative market in this country.

I am very excited to have had this opportunity of revisiting my first reflections on podcasts for this celebratory edition of *Radiofonias*. I am grateful for the chance of reaching a wider international audience as this edition is published in English. Having worked on the translation myself, I wish readers will enjoy this text as the result of an academic's fascination with the changing listening modes and audio routines in our mediatized world.

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