

Quality Indicators for the Production and Assessment of Podcasts' Episodes

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Abstract. In this paper we begin by weighing the importance that the access to information assumes nowadays and, at the same time, the growing need of people to fulfill the time spent getting to and from their workplace. Afterwards we made an approach to the podcast's concept comparing its educational potentialities, specially the role it can play in granting the user the access to "mobile" training modalities at anytime and in anyplace. Finally, concerning the podcasts' episodes quality available on the web, we have decided to develop a set of recommendations at five levels, based on a bibliographic revision – general, introduction, content, conclusion and group work – that can improve the production quality of podcasts' episodes, making them clearer and more effective towards the promotion of learning.

Keywords: Podcast, Production, Assessment, Communication, Internet

1 Introduction

The information makes the world move. We live in a constant data exchange. Mobility is a reality in people's lives and it processes at a much faster speed than a few years ago, i.e., there are more people, who live in small towns and work (or study) in large urban centers (and vice versa). In this context arise the roles of the mobile workers, the working students and many more activities that consubstantiate in the constant movement of its agents. They all have in common the need to take advantage of the time spent during the permanent travels. In order to fill this gap we now have at our disposal several strategies and technologies, which allow the useful management of time that, in other way, would be wasted.

Podcast emerges as one of those alternatives, since it grants a quick and easy access to information, allowing personalized and mobile training alternatives to the user, in which the "Learning space is here, in anyplace; the time for learning is today and always." (Coutinho & Bottentuit Junior, 2007, s/p).

According to Primo (2005: p. 17) podcast "is a media process that emerges from the publishing of audio files on the Internet". Being a relatively new technology, with countless possibilities to be explored, the term is still frequently associated to the availability of musical programming, which was actually in its origin. In fact, the term

podcast is the result of the sum of the words iPod (audio/ video reproduction device) and broadcast (method of data transmission or distribution) and therefore the connotation referred above (Bottentuit Junior & Coutinho, 2007). However, this reality is changing because podcast is being used in the most varied contexts, such as in business as a mean to render available the meeting's contents, in news and entertainment programs, in scientific programs and also in education, where this tool is beginning to be used with a growing success for the transmission and availability of lessons, especially in e-learning, both in Europe and in the Americas.

In a podcast an audio file is called an episode. It should have a short length, since the goal of each episode is to tell a short and direct story on a concept, as well as to give clues for new episodes (Bottentuit Junior & Coutinho, 2007).

The easy access to the Internet and the low costs of storage devices such as mp3, mp4, pen drives, mobile phones, pocket PCs, PDAs, tablet PCs, etc, increases the success in the divulging to the population of this information access modality.

The success of the podcast in news divulging on the most varied channels and media has been an unavoidable reality for some time. However with the introduction of the Web 2.0 and the rise of free software with easy access and handling, the possibility of producing and publishing contents in the web has become a reality for any cybernaut and ever since there has been a proliferation of sites, blogs, wikis, podcasts, etc. The quality of these free productions – in which podcasts are included – is not always evaluated, i.e., they are not filtered before its publishing. This allows a lot of low quality materials to be distributed to the public and used in a less judicious way.

It is in this context that this assignment emerges. The main goal which motivated the development of this assignment was the need to establish quality criteria towards the production of podcasts. This, as we will see, presents an enormous opportunity to the availability of contents in e/b learning activities, and can be used with success, for instance, in the fulfillment of the "dead" times spent travelling from and to the workplace. In order to accomplish this and based on a revision of recent studies, as well as with the observation of several grids to which we had access to, we developed a set of recommendations, organized in five levels – general, introduction, content, conclusion and group work – which can help the episodes become clearer and more effective towards the learning's promotion.

2 Podcast

Podcast is a word that rises from the fusion between iPod (mp3 player manufactured by Apple) and Broadcast (transmission). It can be defined as a personalized radio program recorded with mp3, ogg or mp4 extensions, which are digital formats that allow the storage of music and audio files in a relatively small space. Podcasts can be stored in the computer and/or made available through the Internet and linked to an information file (feed), allowing to sign the programs, and providing the information to the user without going to the producer's site (Barros & Menta, 2007).

Associated with the Podcast's concept are several specific terms, which are important to clarify. In this sense, podcast is understood as a page, site or place where the audio files are available for download; podcasting is the act of recording or divulging the

files on the web; and for last, a podcaster is the person who produces, i.e., the author, who records and develops the files in audio format (Bottentiuit Junior & Coutinho, 2007).

Medeiros (2007) classifies podcasts in four different models: the “metaphor” model, the “edited” model, the “register” model and the “educational” model.

The “*Metaphor*” model is classified as so, since it has characteristics similar to a radio program of a conventional broadcasting station, with the characteristic elements of a program such as: radio announcer, music segments, vignettes, news, interviews, etc. Medeiros (2007: p.5)

The “*Edited*” model emerged as an alternative for those listeners who have lost their favorite show, but still want to listen to it. The broadcasting stations edit the programs that were transmitted during real time programming, making them available in their site in order to be listened afterwards by the “careless” listener, as for example, the sound files made available by radio broadcasting stations such as BBC (idem. ibidem, our bold)

The “*Register*” model is also known as “audioblog”. The most peculiar aspect about this model is the fact that it has diverse themes. It is possible to find podcasts with contents that range from the most specific, such as news and comments on Macintosh technology, priests' sermons, tourism guides, or even “personal confessions in a traffic jam”. (idem, ibidem, our bold)

The last model, whose utility is more recent and tied to Distance Education, is the “Educational” model. Through this podcast model it is possible to make the lessons available, many times by means of continuous editions, similar to the old fascicles of language courses, which were sold in newsstands (idem, p. 6, our bold).

Despite being a recent phenomenon, podcast has reached indexes of exponential growth. In 2005, podcast was considered the “word of the year” by the “New Oxford American Dictionary”, and in less than six months more than 4.940.000 references to the podcasting word were found in Google. It is estimated that there are more than 6 millions’ users of this system in the world (Rezende, 2007). In February of 2004, the word appeared in the English newspaper The Guardian has a synonym for audioblog, i.e., to blog with audio instead of blogging with texts. In the beginning of 2006, the iPod competitors added another meaning for the term podcast: personal on demand broadcast, (Foschini & Taddei, 2006).

According to Chen (2007), the podcast’s popularity is explained by the following factors: a) it allows anyone with a microphone, computer and an internet connection to publish audio files, which can be accessed by other people anywhere in the world; b) podcast's files can be automatically downloaded (from one or) to a mobile device and listened to when and where it is more convenient; c) podcast is free of charge; d) users do not need to pay to download the podcast's files.

According to Foschini & Taddei (2006), this new form of communication is associated with a change in the behavior pattern of the inhabitants of the global world in which we live in: to listen, in the most convenient time and place, programs obtained in the varied programming available in the global network, either for pleasure (a radio program, an interview) or by need (a lesson). To have the possibility to choose among thousands of voices that manifest themselves, all over the world, telling stories, bringing news, telling jokes and which are always waiting for us! Almost without any cost and with the promise of good moments!

In a research recently made, Bottentuit Junior & Coutinho (2008) evaluated the use of mobile technologies in a sample of 1187 individuals belonging to academic communities of several Portuguese universities, verifying that 88% of the people interviewed had a mobile phone and that 11%, besides the mobile phone, also owned a PDA or Smartphone; only 1% of the people interviewed stated not having any kind of mobile device. 72% of the people interviewed stated having access to the Internet from a mobile device, and 78% of the answerers still referred they used these devices (mobile phones, PDA and Smartphone's) as audio files' storage means. It is important to refer that the high numbers to which this survey lead to can, in a certain way, be explained by the high number of answerers (63%), with ages that ranged from 18 to 25 years, i.e., the majority of the participants were university students.

Despite these data not being representative of the Portuguese population, the obtained information shows that podcast could already be widely used in the teaching and learning process of the superior teaching institutions, which does not happen in reality. In fact, and evaluating the results obtained in the survey, the subscription to this kind of service would be simple since the receivers already have the required technological structure (devices for access, storage and Internet service usage), as well as the habit of listening to music using mobile devices. That is, we are wasting resources that could contribute to improve the access to information and knowledge of a generation of digital natives which uses these means in their daily routines.

It is important to highlight that Podcast is not limited to the simple use of the iPod or MP3. The difference between this tool and the simple download of audio files from the Internet is the RSS, as well as the easiness in the creation and recording of episodes from the web. When a user subscribes the RSS service, an e-mail message is sent every time the podcast's page is updated. This allows the user not having to consult the podcasts in a daily basis, but still being permanently updated on the last posts of the podcasts' authors.

The following recommendations are a result of the analysis of some podcast's assessment grids available on the web, namely: "Rubric for Podcasts" of the University of Wisconsin, "Podcasting Rubric" of Bendigo Education Apple Users Team; the authors took in account observations registered from the analysis of documents available on the web as well as in the diverse pedagogical experiments on the use of these tools in the teaching practice (Cruz, Bottentuit Junior, Coutinho & Carvalho, 2007) and also in studies carried out in order to divulge the educational use of the podcast (Bottentuit Junior & Coutinho, 2007; Foschini & Taddei, 2006). We now present the set of criteria that, in our view, should guide the podcast's creation, especially the ones which are to be used in the educational context.

General recommendations

- Make a brief guide. Sketch the path to be followed. It is not necessary to create a rigid structure with all the expected details, because it can lose its niceness and naturalness. The guide is used to remember what to say and, at the same time, contributes to eliminate the silence periods and the moments of indecision.
- Prepare the paper material and read out loud in order to check the correct punctuation, since the lack of commas and full stops or reading too quickly can lead the listener to distinct interpretations of the proposed goal.

- Read the text with good intonation, trying to make a speech as if you were having a dialog with the listener.
- Make the recording away from noise sources.
- Maintain a median distance (neither too close, nor too far) from the microphone in order not to damage the recording's quality.
- Clock the episodes' total reading time before recording, avoiding this way a recording without an ending or a divided recording due to excess of time.
- In case that mistakes occur after the episodes' recording, such as long silence periods (at the beginning or end of the recording), use audio editing software to perform cuts to the undesired parts.
- As an auxiliary resource use background sounds or music in the episodes. The music and sounds should be used to enrich the presentation and therefore its choice should go through a selection process.
- Always be aware of the author's rights whenever making available sound or music that is still not part of the public domain.
- The transition between subjects must be clearly understood, resorting to sounds or vocal intonation. The lack of these resources can compromise the episodes' quality.
- Whenever possible create episodes with interviews and debates with other specialists in the subject, since this practice can add more value to the content and bring up new knowledge.
- Define the periodicity. Update your podcast on a regular basis: once a week or once a month. Update only if you have quality programs. Do not be afraid to delete files that are not so good or that you do not like.
- When inviting people to the episodes' recording (interviews and debates), make clear the goal and the recording time in order for the guest not to exceed the time available for answering;
- Chose the most adequate software to the financial and technological capability of your project, since, in some cases, it is possible to render more effective the episodes resorting to more sophisticated resources and applications. However, it is possible to create good episodes with the free software available on the web.
- After recording the episode, check the file's size (in Kb). If the file is too large it is possible to convert it to other formats in order to compress its size. This is a fundamental concern since very large files take a lot of time to be sent to the web (upload), as well as to download. It also makes its storage difficult for those who have small sized devices.
- Record 20 to 30 minutes episodes, since larger episodes can tire and distract the listeners' attention;
- Avoid the use of jargon, foreignism or local meaning words, since the audience can this way overcome the expected boundaries (a class, a city, other countries) and be accessed by geographically dispersed users, who also wish to completely understand the content;
- Always check the volume before recording the episode, since recordings with very high or very low volume can lead to the episodes' failure.
- Listen to the new program before divulging it.

Recommendations for the introduction

- Try to maintain a more intimate contact with the audience in order to call the attention for what will be presented.
- Reveal to the audience what they should expect from the episode to be presented.
- Reveal the name of the speaker who makes the information available;
- Mention the recording's place, date and hour. This item is very important in order for the speaker to define if the information is recent or if it is already outdated.
- Reveal the podcast's target public;

Recommendations for the content

- It should be original and creative, highlighting the proposal or the main idea to be transmitted during the episode;
- The information should be precise, consistent and brief, i.e., it should only transmit the essential;
- A richer vocabulary and references to other authors improves the presented content;
- Establishing a goal or proposal and maintaining the focus on the subject is an excellent method towards the information's transmission;

Recommendations for the conclusion

- Offer a brief ending, remembering the relevance of the episode's subject;
- Point out other episodes in order to complement the learning or the research on sites and other auxiliary sources;
- Try to summarize what was said in one sentence or strong word, i.e., try to look for something that the audience can learn and therefore remember what was said.

Recommendations for the group work

- Sometimes the activities of creation/utilization of the podcast modality are accomplished in group and, in this case, one can work in two distinctive ways:
- In the first case the group is divided and works in a cooperative way, i.e., a person is responsible for technical details such as: software to be used, recording environment, episodes' length; another individual is in charge of the content's selection and the episodes' text writing; a third person makes the recording and introduces improvements to the final version. This kind of organization is called cooperative work.
- In the second case, the group works in a collaborative way and all is decided from a discussion within the group. This means that the choice of the best software and the episodes' writing relies on the opinion of all the group's elements and that decisions are made by agreement.

3 Final comments

In a globalised world where time is short, podcast emerges as an extremely powerful alternative technology to be used in the teaching and learning process, either in distance learning (e-learning) or as a complement to the face-to-face teaching (b-learning). In fact, podcast allows the teacher to make available didactic materials such as lessons, documentaries and interviews in audio format, which can be listened by students at anytime of the day and in any geographical place (Bottentuit Junior & Coutinho, 2007).

However, and as with all other technologies, an incorrect use of podcasts can generate perverse effects. In fact, for web users, the podcasts' newness is attractive in several ways. First because it is easy to become an editor, recording and editing files as desired, using only free software available on the Internet. This freedom for editing and choosing what we want to listen to, represents an huge leap towards the information diffusion on the web. It sets the listeners free from the restrictions of schedules, allowing them to listen to the same program or interview as many times as they wish and whenever they want.

However, as we had warned before in this article, podcasts' creation, either with an educational or journalistic goal, demands the compliance of some basic rules, which will guarantee the quality needed towards a good comprehension of the content to be transmitted. With podcast, the user can become a producer and opinion maker, can experiment the universe of the journalist, of the speaker and of the cultural agitator and can even abandon the anonymity. With little technical knowledge, it is possible to become the master of a communication support. It all depends on the use given to the podcast and its creativity. Therefore, before we venture ourselves in a podcast's production, it is important to know how to proceed in order to create a good episode, which requires to get familiarized with the technical issues, with the aspects regarding the communication and, more important than all, with the appropriateness of the available contents. Because, as Coutinho & Bottentuit Junior (2007, s/p.) refer "More than just means of communication or neutral tools, CIT are both cognitive and social technologies which, with the use of a computer connected to the net, provide all users unlimited space and time, with all the positive and negative aspects this circumstance brings"

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