

# Key issue

## The *Nature* Podcast



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The word 'podcast'<sup>1</sup> has only recently celebrated its second birthday but is already famous. It was coined by web developer and journalist Ben Hammersley for an article<sup>2</sup> about the rise of 'audio blogging'. The explosion in podcast activity since then attests to the sheer ease and convenience with which audio content can now be created and consumed on the web – and also to the magical allure of anything even vaguely associated with Apple's iconic iPod.

Podcasts are easy to create<sup>3</sup>, which is one reason that podcasting is often compared to blogging. However, making a *good* podcast is actually quite difficult. As a result, many of the most popular shows to date have been from traditional broadcasters, such as the BBC, who often simply repackage existing radio shows for this new distribution channel. But with such low barriers to entry, participants from outside the traditional broadcast media were bound to emerge – whether students in dorm rooms playing with the latest cool toys, or print media companies looking to expand their offerings.

Technically speaking, podcasting involves using RSS feeds<sup>4</sup> to syndicate audio files across the web. From a listener's point of view, podcasting is really just time-shifted radio. It involves using a piece of podcast-receiving software (such as iTunes or iPodder) and inputting the RSS feed addresses of any shows that interest you. Like any RSS reader, the software periodically revisits each feed to look for new items of content, though in this case the

feeds point not to web pages but audio files, which are downloaded for you to hear at your leisure. If you also own a portable MP3 player (such as an iPod, though other players work too), any new audio files can be transferred there automatically when it is synchronized with your computer, then enjoyed while you are out and about.

The *Nature* Podcast<sup>5</sup>, which is a free audio accompaniment to the weekly international journal of science<sup>6</sup>, launched at the beginning of October 2005, initially for a trial period of three months. Although we believed that it would prove popular, we had little objective data on which to make proper forecasts because at the time there were relatively few science podcasts available and none yet (as far as we knew) from another scientific journal or magazine. We had nevertheless decided against conducting formal market research because it would have cost at least as much as the trial podcast itself, and would have served only to slow us down.

The show, which comes out every Wednesday at about 6pm GMT, features interviews with the scientists and editors behind the most interesting and important research in each week's issue of *Nature*. There is also an interview with one of *Nature's* news editors, who gives a summary of the main stories of the week. The whole show typically lasts for around 25 minutes, though with a considerable variation from week to week. The fact that we do not have a specific airtime slot to fill means we can let the show expand or contract

naturally to fit the amount of material we have each week. It is hosted and produced by Chris Smith and his team at the University of Cambridge, but *Nature* retains complete editorial control over the content. Chris is a virology researcher and medic but also has a considerable track record as a science broadcaster with organizations such as the BBC and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. Given that this is the first time in *Nature's* 137-year history that we have produced regular audio content – and thus a giant leap for us in terms of experience and expertise – it was only by collaborating in this way that we could launch a show so quickly (2–3 months), whilst also achieving high quality.

Because production workflows were still bedding down, we gave the show a relatively 'soft' launch. In the first week we placed one or two *Nature* Podcast links on selected pages at Nature.com, but there was no accompanying promotional campaign, let alone any attempt to build an audience in advance. From the second week, with things going quite smoothly, we felt confident enough to begin promoting the show more widely across our various mailing lists, websites and journals. We also registered the show in a number of podcast directories, most importantly the extremely popular 'iTunes Music Store' run by Apple. The growth that followed exceeded our most optimistic expectations. By the fourth week, the show was attracting 20,000 downloads a week and appeared in the iTunes Top 100 on both sides of the Atlantic. In the UK it reached number 33, ahead of both 'Sportsweek' from BBC Radio Five Live and 'Madonna 1-888-2-Confess' – leading to the inevitable inside joke that this was perhaps the first time outside a dictionary that science had come before sex and sport! The traffic has continued on an upward trend ever since, reaching around 40,000 downloads a week by late March 2006.

This success led us to declare at the end of the initial three-month trial period in January 2006 that we intend to continue producing a weekly podcast for *Nature* for the foreseeable future. At the same time, we were fortunate enough to welcome Bio-Rad, a scientific equipment supplier, as sponsor of the show, which also put it on a firmer financial footing.

This is not to say that the *Nature* Podcast is intended solely – or even primarily – as a direct

revenue generator. It provides plenty of other benefits besides, for example:

- **Readers:** The show is consciously designed to complement the print and online versions of the journal, not to replace them. Indeed, audio is such a different medium from the written word that any other approach (and there are examples of podcasts in which an editor simply reads out articles verbatim) would be a big mistake. This means that the podcast enables readers to get more out of the journal. In particular, they can hear the scientists themselves explaining their work, usually much more informally and straightforwardly than in their papers, and they have an opportunity to hear about interesting work outside their own field that they might easily have glossed over while browsing the print edition or website. If my own experience is anything to go by, many a podcast listener will have scurried off to the website or library to refer to the journal after hearing a particularly thought-provoking interview.
- **Authors:** Scientists love to talk about their work and, contrary to popular belief, most can do so in an accessible and engaging way, especially in the company of an experienced interviewer. Our podcast gives *Nature* authors an opportunity to explain their work in their own words to a large global audience of scientifically literate listeners. In doing so, they can convey their excitement much more effectively than is possible in a formal scientific paper. Though I have not yet heard of any firm evidence that this is already happening, I hope and believe that the existence of the *Nature* Podcast will become yet another reason for the world's top researchers to choose to publish in our journal.
- **Nature itself:** As a freely available supplement to the journal, the podcast is a wonderful way to tell the world about the amazing science that appears there each week. We know from a recent audience survey that the majority of *Nature* Podcast listeners do not have personal subscriptions. It seems not unreasonable to assume that anyone willing to spend almost half an hour each week listening to the show might be willing to spend a few dollars (or pounds or yen) to be able to read the journal. With podcast audience figures rapidly approaching a level

comparable to the print circulation of the journal itself, the podcast could therefore become a significant source of new subscribers.

To some degree, these benefits were all anticipated before we even launched the show. Others, though, have come as more of a surprise. For example, we appear to have an eager non-English-speaking audience, especially among young Japanese scientists. The reason is that the *Nature* Podcast gives them a good way of honing their scientific English listening skills. One blogger even posts a weekly Japanese summary of the *Nature* Podcast and many listeners have asked us for written English transcripts – which we now provide<sup>5</sup> – so that they can read along as they listen. Although we had no intention of creating a language-teaching tool, we are delighted to know that we have inadvertently helped in this regard too.

Another very important benefit for everyone concerned is that people can listen to podcasts during times when they could not possibly be reading a journal or browsing the web – for example while commuting, conducting experiments or exercising. This means that listeners can make more efficient use of their time – something they mentioned a lot in our audience survey. It also means that *Nature* authors and editors have a new opportunity to engage with other scientists in a way that does not vie for their audience's attention as another article or journal would. On the contrary, one of the most common requests we receive from listeners is to make our show longer to help fill more of the 'dead time' in their day. "I have a lot of microscope time," was how one of them put it.

It is this above all – the fact that the medium has the potential to fulfil both the listener's desire to

learn more *and* their need to do so in a way that uses time efficiently – that makes me optimistic about the future of scientific podcasting. Though the podcasting phenomenon has shown explosive growth over the last two years, we are almost certainly just at the beginning, especially among scientists. Historically, scientific publishers have provided material that can be read and browsed and, more recently, clicked and searched too. Welcome now to an era in which at least some of the scientific literature will include elements that can also be heard.

### References and notes

1. For more details see:  
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Podcasting>
2. Hammersley, B., Audible Revolution. In: *The Guardian*, 12 February 2004.  
<http://technology.guardian.co.uk/online/story/0,,1145689,00.html>
3. For example, Apple – which was not at all involved in the early development of podcasting – has recently added a 'podcast studio' feature to its GarageBand audio editing software. Steve Jobs, Apple's CEO, demonstrated this during his 2006 Macworld keynote address:  
<http://macworld.apple.com.edgesuite.net/mw/index.html> (The GarageBand podcast studio demonstration starts about 40 minutes into the video.)
4. For more details see:  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RSS\\_\(protocol\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RSS_(protocol))
5. See: <http://www.nature.com/nature/podcast/>
6. See: <http://www.nature.com/nature/>