

*Podcasts

Podcasting is a means of distributing audiovisual material on a subscription basis via the Internet that has rapidly gained popularity since 2004. The system employs RSS 'feeds', to which users subscribe using an aggregator or 'podcatcher' such as iTunes. Material is usually delivered in MP3 format and can be played on any digital audio player or computer. It is possible to subscribe to a podcast by pasting the URL into your aggregator, but most can be found by running a search within the aggregator. iTunes allows users to build up a library of subscriptions, in which new episodes will appear as they are released. Many services are free and those that are subscription-based offer various rates for institutions and individuals.

Podcasting is beginning to take off as a means of scientific communication. A handful of journals, including *Nature*, have launched their own services, there are a few quality services delivering scientific news and discussion, and some commercial use of the technology in medicine.

Medicine was perhaps the first discipline to realise the potential applications of podcasting. A commercial service, McGraw-Hill's **Access Medicine** delivers updates and advice from top physicians based on individual or institutional subscriptions. A free alternative is provided by **Critical Care Medicine**.

The **New England Journal of Medicine** has also caught on to the podcast movement. Beginning in July with Dr Kenneth Arrow on making antimalarials available in Africa,

the *NEJM* has used podcasting to make available interviews with key figures on subjects such as the ethics of drug patenting, the improvement of emergency medical care after the



London bombings and, most recently 'genetic discrimination'. The approach of using podcasts to examine ethical issues has also been taken by some science news podcasts. One of the best of these is **Science Friday**, which uses its service to discuss issues such as intelligent design, stem cell research, and the US response to Hurricane

Katrina.

Nature, who began podcasting at the beginning of October, use their service to provide a summary of the highlights of the latest issue of the journal. Hosted by Dr Chris Smith, from Cambridge, the 20-minute weekly shows covers the top stories and papers in the issue with interviews with the corresponding author or the editor responsible for the relevant section of the journal.



The American Society for Microbiology has taken another approach again, launching **Microbe World Radio** a daily 90-minute discussion of microbiological news. The focus of this is again on a fairly basic level: for example, the latest discussion on slime molds 'they're here and they're weird' is a very popularist take on the 'blobs', with a very brief interview and an overview.

IT conversations has some interesting non-technical podcasts. These include interviews with figures at the forefront of the new Internet tech-

nology such as Google's co-founder Sergey Brin, JBoss' Marc Fleury on using open source models in business, and a member of Yahoo's research lab discussing their new contextual search facility.

Podcasting is a convenient new way to access resources and the short overview, interview or discursive approach that most have taken so far allows easy listening: as one scientist commented on the discussion forum **Nobel Intent**, they can enliven routine lab tasks such as setting up assays. There is undoubtedly much room for development of the concept of podcasting.

Their concept of 'learncasting' has already appeared, with audio material supplemented by video and text to achieve academic instruction or support and was the subject of a recent seminar at London University's **London Knowledge Lab**. Applications of 'learncasting' to science could include running instructions and demonstrations of methods and author commentary on important papers.

For more information and links see:

Wikipedia definition:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Podcasting#Finding_podcasts

Podcaster's Wiki:

http://www.podcasterswiki.com/index.php?title=Main_Page

The Podcasting Directory:

<http://www.podcast.net/>

And to make your own podcasts:

<http://www.podcast411.com/page5.html>