

## **I. Why Explore Podcasting?**

As digital technologies increasingly transform the traditional practices of teaching, learning, and research, the University Library at Northwestern University has assumed a correspondingly important role in making these technologies available to faculty and students. A few years ago, its “2 East” corridor was extensively renovated in order to bring into physical proximity—and encourage synergy among—its Collection Management department; the Academic Technologies group, which works with faculty to develop software and hardware applications for academic purposes; and its Digital Media Services (DMS) department, which works with faculty and graduate students to create and deliver sound, video, and text in digital formats.

The Library was aware of scattered experimenting by professors on campus with podcasting of lectures and supplementary course materials, an application which has obvious benefits for students, allowing them to hear lectures they might otherwise have had to miss and to review lectures at will. Observing the growing popularity of podcasting in general—and the ubiquity on campus of students with MP3 devices permanently installed in their ears—DMS decided to investigate the potential applications of this technology to Library activities by establishing a Podcasting Work Group with 11 members from a cross-section of Library departments and branches including the Law Library, the Health Sciences Library, and the Schaffner Library.

## **II. The Mission of the Podcast Work Group**

The Work Group was charged with the following goals:

- Examine current podcasting activities at Northwestern
- Identify good uses of podcasting both at Northwestern and at other institutions
- Determine possible podcast uses and anticipate needs for Library users
- Provide recommendations concerning podcasting activities for the Library

The Work Group assumed from the outset that podcasting of lecture content would be the main focus of Library interest, the major question being whether the Library should undertake a leading role in providing the necessary technology and training campus-wide, and in archiving and providing student access to this content. But there were other parties within the Library who were interested in the technology, including the Public Relations department, which saw potential for outreach about Library services; the Reference department, which saw it as a possible way to address research inquiries from users; and University Archives, which is often called upon to provide historical information about Northwestern for admissions and alumni tours of the campus. The Work Group also included members of the Library Information Technology Support Services (LITSS) staff who could consult about the procedures and potential obstacles for implementing podcast applications.

Meeting every two weeks for a period of seven months, the Work Group decided to proceed by:

1. Investigating how podcasting might already be used, formally and informally, on campus, and how other universities might be using it
2. Proposing and producing a range of pilot podcasts in order to thoroughly experience and document the process and reveal any unforeseen obstacles
3. Evaluating both of these activities to determine how useful the technology seemed in achieving the intended goal and what commitment of resources might be necessary to carry each activity out on a regular basis.

### **III. Podcasting at Northwestern and Beyond**

Although research showed that other universities were supporting official programs for podcasting course content, including both lectures and supplementary materials, existing efforts at Northwestern proved to be “sporadic and not centrally supported,” because, as it turned out, there were some very significant obstacles—most significantly, a pronounced feeling among faculty members that lecture-podcasting was a “not intellectual-property-friendly” activity, i.e. that they feared that “publishing” lecture content in this format would cause them to lose control over their own original content.

Similarly, podcasting initiatives for non-class-related purposes were sporadic and decentralized, with several schools, including the Journalism and Communications schools, doing some special-event podcasting, and University Relations, the department that handles campus-wide media and public relations activities, experimenting with some news podcasting. But no one school or department had taken on the role of championing or facilitating podcasting efforts campus-wide. There was a general sense of uncertainty about what the specific benefits of the technology would prove to be, and a reluctance to commit money and personnel as long as these benefits were unclear.

The Work Group did conduct a survey to try to ascertain the level of interest the community might have in some form of Library podcast. The survey determined that while only a quarter of faculty respondents reported using podcasts, more than half the undergraduate respondents did, suggesting that the tool would be better suited to communicating with the younger segment of the Library’s user population, and also that content be tailored to them. Of various forms of content proposed, including News & Resources, Course Materials, Research Coaching, or Self-Guided Library Tours, about half the respondents declared that they “might be interested” in such content. The Work Group concluded there really was no realistic way to ascertain theoretical interest in these products, since too much depended on the way they might be executed. The only way to measure desire for this content was to produce experimental content first and then, if possible, gauge the reaction.

### **IV. Pilot Podcasts**

The Work Group's experimental Pilot Podcasts fell into three categories:

1. Academic course support: for example, the Law Library hosted a series of lectures on insurance law for students from the school's Executive Korean Program, which would allow the students to review the class after they returned to their native country.
2. Library instruction: a series of reference tutorials for part-time MBA students covering business information sources.
3. Promotion of Library resources and services: a podcast featuring the curator of an exhibit about the Library's history telling the story of the exhibit; and an interview with a scholar who had written about the Leopold and Loeb murder using materials from the Northwestern Archives.

Producing these podcasts gave the Work Group a realistic grasp of how much time and energy needed to be devoted to the process. The Group was also able to establish and document the steps other podcasters would need to follow in order to produce and publish their content.

## V. Overall Findings

To its own surprise, the Work Group concluded that academic course podcasting was the least appealing application from the Library's point of view—not because it would be of little value, but because the issues of intellectual property, tech support, and money were simply too overwhelming for its current resources. The Group did conclude, however, that there were potential benefits to the Library of developing a podcasting program, which were articulated as follows:

- **Expanding points of access:** Library users are increasingly less inclined to accept limits of time and space; they expect a Library that's always open and accessible to everyone. Podcasting expands the range of ways information can be made accessible to users. It makes electronic information highly portable, since in addition to desktop downloading, files can also be downloaded to MP3 players, which users can access while commuting, traveling, or—for instance—taking a guided tour of an exhibit or space.
- **Expanding our outreach/public relations resources:** Made accessible through the Library's website, podcasting would be an effective way of communicating directly with our users; it offers an engaging way to create and nurture interest in the resources we offer—including the website itself.
- **Expanding our educational resources:** For some departments, educational activities tend to be cyclical and repeating, e.g. kinds of questions frequently asked the reference librarians at the beginning of a quarter, or when a particular course is given. Podcasting would allow audio Q&As and mini-tutorials to answer such questions, and students would have access at times reference librarians would not otherwise be available.
- **Enhancing the Library's role as campus leader for evolving digital technologies:** Because there is currently no umbrella group that serves as a

resource for campus podcasting initiatives to date, the research of the Work Group may serve as a reference point for others who wish to explore its potential.

Rather than recommend that the Library begin to allocate resources to podcasting without having a clear idea of the tangible benefits, the Work Group suggested that it simply begin to integrate basic podcasting activities into the regular tool kit of public relations, outreach, and reference resources it currently employs, which includes several newsletters published in blog software that can also accommodate podcasting. Audio/video content can also be posted on the Library's website either for download or streaming access.

## **VI. Implementing the Podcast Recommendations**

Essentially, the Work Group recommended a course of wading—rather than diving—into podcasting. Its specific recommendations, presented to the Library's administration, were divided into three different levels of potential podcasting programs, ranging from one that would be feasible with current resources alone to one that would require significant additional allocation of staff and budget. This leaves it up to the administration to decide what level of commitment makes sense—a decision that may not be made until the early experimental podcasts begin to produce definitive feedback about their value.

Meanwhile, the Work Group will begin to educate staffers throughout the Library about the process for creating and publishing their own content, based on lessons learned through its own work.