

Podcasting Politics

by *Bill Berkowitz*

After Apple Computer announced its new video-capable iPod, the San Francisco Chronicle's Mark Morford, a controversial and ever-iconoclastic columnist, enthused that the new "sexy" and "delicious" device would usher in a future where pornography would be available at the flick of a finger. But Morford isn't the only one imagining the future of podcasting. In June, the Corporate Podcasting Summit in San Francisco will provide an introduction to, and workshops on, podcasting to companies that are thinking about adding podcasting to their marketing mix. And many conservative political organizations have already added podcasting to their mix, according to Jennifer Biddison, the coalitions manager and associate editor for Townhall.com -- one of the oldest and most successful right-wing networking websites. In an article entitled "Podcasting: The latest trend in talk," Biddison maintained that while podcasting has already become a useful political tool for the conservative movement, its potential has yet to be tapped. Conservative groups that have a proven track record of getting their message out via a sophisticated coordinated network -- foundations, think tanks and public policy institutes, the Internet (including the blogosphere), newspapers, magazines and talk radio -- are now "hopping aboard" the podcasting train, Biddison explained. Thanks to the financial wherewithal and technical savvy of a handful of right-wing organizations, conservatives can now listen to many of their favorite right-wing radio talk jockeys, tune in to a discussion about privatizing social security and other critical policy questions, and catch the latest presentation from the Heritage Foundation, Washington's premier conservative think tank, whenever they please. For the uninitiated, podcasting -- as defined by the online encyclopedia Wikipedia -- is "the distribution of audio or video files, such as radio programs or music videos, over the internet... for listening on mobile devices and personal computers." In short, the essence of podcasting is "creating content (audio or video) for an audience that wants to listen when they want, where they want, and how they want." The term was coined in 2004 -- a combination of "iPod" and "broadcasting" -- and its usage has become so ubiquitous that it was designated the 2005 word of the year by the New Oxford American Dictionary. In March 2005, John Edwards, the Democratic Party's candidate for vice president in the 2004 presidential election became the first national-level U.S. politician to hold his own podcast, Wikipedia pointed out. That summer, Pres. George W. Bush's weekly radio addresses became available via podcasts, and the Republican National Committee developed its own podcasts, available at GOP.com. According to Townhall's Jennifer Biddison, social conservatives have a batch of programs from which to choose. The Christian conservative American Family Association is offering two daily shows: The AFA Report, in which the Rev. Donald Wildmon looks at current events, and Today's Issues, which features a mix of current events and special guests. Social conservatives can also access podcasts from the Family Research Council (FRC), a powerful Washington-based Christian lobbying group. FRC offers Washington Watch Weekly, hosted by the organization's president, Tony Perkins. Foreign policy enthusiasts can check out Danger Zone -- a series of programs sponsored by the Foundation for the Defence of Democracies -- where former U.S. Ambassador Richard Carlson hosts the weekly show on terrorism. Podcasting also played a role in the recent Canadian elections. In a series of pre-election articles entitled "Election 2006 and Social Media", Kate Trgovac, currently the manager of web evolution for Petro-Canada, looked at how five Canadian political parties used "social media" -- podcasting, blogging, emailing, etc. -- "to get their message across... (and) promote their agenda online." "Social media," Trgovac wrote, "offers mechanisms (e.g. discussion forums, comments on blogs, event calendar/MeetUps, eCards, even branded downloads) to further a conversation between readers who are interested in a particular topic. This is a change for marketers where we have not always been interested in such a level of discourse; ditto for political parties." The Conservative Party of Canada (CPC) -- which emerged victorious -- used "social media extensively", Trgovac reported. "On the home page, in addition to the 'Volunteer,' 'Donate' and 'Request a Lawn Sign' links that are standard fare on political sites in 2006, there are links to Email Updates, Podcasts, eCards and two Blogs." Although the podcasts were not original content produced for the web, they did provide access to a number of speeches of Stephen Harper -- Canada's newly elected Prime Minister. In addition, there was an "assortment of announcements by the CPC and CPC radio ads" as well as videos of the party's TV commercials and other video content. "I think podcasting, like other social media tools are incredibly effective for niche constituent groups within larger political entities," Trgovac told IPS. "For example, a Toronto-based candidate for a national political party

uses podcasts both to address specific local issues that aren't given air-time on the national scene, as well as to address special interest areas that are of importance to him" and his constituents. "The podcast format" is particularly "ideal for our very on demand and mobile culture", Trgovac explained. "I can take podcasts with me wherever I go -- something of incredible importance in a society that has a large number of commuters and distracted multi-taskers." Although Trgovac acknowledged that "conservative movements (both political and religious) are often the first to market and exploit new technologies to deliver their messages, there is no way that the U.S. conservative movement can 'own' podcasting in the same way that it owns talk radio." Trgovac insisted that "the power of distribution has shifted dramatically and is no longer in the hands of political ideologues", but is now in "the hands of the people". Since it is relatively inexpensive, "anyone can podcast". And while the quality of the broadcasts varies, anyone can be a podcaster, "and their potential audience could be the same as Rush Limbaugh's or Al Franken's." While only a fool would bet against Mark Morford's prediction that video podcasting will lead to a boom in the distribution of pornography, Townhall's Jennifer Biddison also sees a future where podcasting will become another well-honed partisan political tool that will allow right-wing think tanks and Christian conservative advocacy groups to further dominate the political debate. Kate Trgovac has a broader view: She sees podcasting as "the great equalizer", a democratic instrument that has the potential of tapping into a global audience. As they say, stay tuned.

Photo of Mr. Berkowitz by Earl Richardson

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