MSCOPE Big Project Proposal
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Project Title – Voices Speak Louder than Labels: Podcasting at MSI

What are Podcasts?

In recent years, online audio/video broadcasts called podcasts have become an increasingly popular method for broadcasting information over the internet. Podcast users may download individual podcasts by browsing or searching the internet; however, podcasting's real strength is automation: free software may be used to subscribe to podcasts and periodically download them without visiting a website. This has several advantages. First, it means the user has to spend less time and energy accessing the information, simply turning on the computer and connecting to the internet will suffice. Second, podcasting allows the person to listen to the information at any time that is convenient. They only need to be connected to the internet while the computer updates the information, but they can listen to it at any time even if offline. This is especially relevant with the advent of MP3 players. Many people now subscribe to a variety of podcasts and enjoy them while performing other tasks like going to the gym or traveling to work. [1]

The Big Idea

Our group would like to develop a podcast, to be featured on MSI's website, which would circulate information related to the museum's exhibits. The guiding principle behind this idea is to give the exhibits voices of their own which reach beyond the walls of the museum.

The obvious advantage of podcasting is that it expands the museum's audience. In addition to reaching non-Chicagoans, a podcast accommodates people who can't read or who would prefer an audio/video presentation over reading labels. Podcasting is also an excellent way to give exhibits much greater flexibility in terms of content. It enables the museum to highlight multiple facets of an exhibit without altering the exhibit itself. One could, for example, develop a podcast about an exhibit's historical or cultural context. Expanding content could simultaneously expand the museum's audience and make the visitor's experience more robust and fulfilling.

Audience

By making MSI exhibits accessible from outside the museum, we clearly have the potential to reach quite a large (global!) audience. However, not everyone uses podcasts, and targeting the whole world is quite ambitious (maybe). We ultimately want to target a specific audience.

Two recent studies [2, 3] indicate that a small but growing fraction of internet users download podcasts. The new technology seems most appealing to males age 18-34, but there is evidence for an increasing number of female users. It is unclear how the demographics of podcasting will grow and shift as more people become aware of it. For now, we are choosing to target both sexes, ages 18-34. Our evaluations should tell us whether this is an optimal choice.

Making the Podcasts

Instructions for making and syndicating podcasts are readily available. It's inexpensive and requires only a recording device, software to make web-ready files, software to syndicate the files, and web-space for storing the files. We expect that our capable coach, Brenda, will make the technology run very smoothly. We also understand that MSI is currently strapped for webspace – it should not be a problem to store the podcast prototypes on MSCOPE webspace.

Content

A recording of a single person talking about science could easily become dry and lecture-like. We therefore propose that each podcast have either an interview or conversational style. The interviewer would be someone from MSCOPE or MSI. The interviewees can be any experts on science/industry topics covered at the museum. For instance we could interview

- o Academics – Professors, research scientists, grad students
- o Museum staff or museum fact-checkers
- o Other professionals from industry, civil service, etc.

We anticipate that non-MSI and non-academic interviewees will need some sort of incentive for helping MSI (it is typically easy to find professors, research scientists, or grad students who enjoy talking about their work). Presumably, other professionals will welcome an opportunity to advertise their agencies.

Various "science shows" are already available on the web. In order to make our podcasts unique and useful to MSI, they should in some way tie into the exhibits (or demos) at the museum. There are a number of potential ways to relate podcasts to exhibits:

- o A podcast could give prospective visitors a "sneak peek" of an exhibit. It could get them interested and make them feel more knowledgeable before their visit. This is also a form of advertising.
- o People who enjoyed an exhibit could download a podcast for additional information (enrichment).

- Podcasts could be made available for downloading while at the museum. They could provide audio supplements for exhibits.
- Podcasts could provide simpler versions of more complicated topics covered at the museum (or more in-depth versions of simple topics).
- A podcast could provide historical context, cultural context, or the thinking behind the exhibit and why/how it was created.
- Podcasts could be used to answer visitors' questions or questions submitted online.
- A podcast could simply use an exhibit as a starting point to talk about a broad subject and be otherwise unrelated to the exhibit.

This list is by no means exhaustive. At this time, it is not clear how our podcasts will relate to MSI exhibits. We would like to complete our front-end evaluation before choosing a direction.

Evaluation

Formative evaluations will be especially important for this project. Because podcasting is a new medium for MSI, we do not know yet whether there is definitely an audience for it. In general, podcasting is relatively new, and although it seems to be gaining popularity quickly, the possibility remains that it will never reach the mainstream recognition necessary for a museum with such a broad audience. Again, the demographics for the podcasting audience are still uncertain. Whereas we hope to attract listeners from outside the museum's visitor base, we will need to evaluate our potential audience from within the museum first. We will determine whether there is an audience among MSI's guests by conducting very brief interviews on the museum floor. We need to know how many guests: (1) visit MSI's website, (2) use the internet for news/information, and (3) would be interested in listening to podcasts about science. Fortunately, back-end evaluations of the project can be conducted easily and continuously. Because the project is web-based we can track how many hits it gets and which back-links produce the most hits. Also, we will include a simple web-survey for questions and comments allowing for continuous interaction with the listeners.

Exposure

Because podcasting is a new venue for the museum, we will need to make the guests aware of the new feature. Promoting can be done at MSI and on MSI's website, incorporating links on the exhibit sites and perhaps a general mention of it on the main exhibit page. While our most basic goal is to supplement the exhibits, the podcasts would ideally catch interest and bring people to the exhibits. We will therefore need advertising not only from within MSI but also from unrelated web sources. Potentially, we will have back-links on various blogs and podcast directories. People with no plans on going to MSI should be able find one of the podcasts and become regular listeners. Maybe they will even make a trip to the museum itself after hearing about a new exhibit.

References

[1] Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Podcast

[2] EWeek.com,
http://www.eweek.com/article2/0,1759,1852423,00.asp?kc=EWRSS03119TX1K0000594

[3] DesignTechnica, http://news.designtechnica.com/article9151.html