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Big Media Wants a Piece Of Your Pod

ALL of us could probably agree that any time Paris Hilton and [General Motors](#) converge on the same thing, a significant cultural moment is under way.

Recently, those two remarkably different brands decided it was worth their time and effort to put together a podcast. On a podcast for the movie "House of Wax," Ms. Hilton talks about the onerous responsibilities of doing publicity for the film. G.M., meanwhile, used one of its recent podcasts to introduce the 2006 Buick Lucerne, which combines "high-level technology and luxury features with a spacious quiet interior." Notably, the carmaker used rhetoric that might apply equally to the Lucerne or Ms. Hilton: "Its body is contoured, athletic-looking with a very strong stance."

In a nascent state, podcasting is the platform du jour, the latest form of jailbreak media that has plain old citizens pulling up the microphone and mainstream media running scared. [Forrester Research](#) has suggested that by the end of the decade, 12 million people will be listening to podcasts as part of their media diet.

In an effort to walk back the cat - young people are listening to iPods, therefore media should be reiterated in a form that they both use and enjoy - big media is taking a stab at the next big thing. Much of it is awkward and some of it is downright dumb. But it costs almost nothing to experiment with, and this time media organizations are determined not to miss a significant opportunity.

Given recent history, you cannot blame them for paying attention. Network television is dancing on a ledge that gives way bit by bit every day. Newspapers have come to see flat circulation as a huge win. And radio, once the darling of Wall Street, has become a drag on earnings. Their audiences are being atomized, sliced and diced into ever narrowing niches of gamers, surfers and [iPod](#)-ers.

They had been run over by the Web, blindsided by digital downloading and scolded by the blogs. So when a marriage occurred between blogs and streaming audio called podcasts, the mainstream media - or M.S.M., as they are derisively known - jumped right in. Infiniti, [Clear Channel](#) and Sirius all came up with pod media on the radio side, while ABC and NBC immediately came up with their own version of a daily headline download, and Scripps-Howard and BusinessWeek came up with audio versions of their products.

The ruling media elite are quickly adopting the methodology and technology of the insurgency, attempting to co-opt something that was meant to tip them over. This time, the revolution will be televised, broadcast and published.

In so doing, major media are attempting to transform a grass-roots movement into an Astroturf replica that resembled the new, new thing, but would still allow them to hold the high ground.

Except there may not be a revolution. Podcasting is a charming, even amazing, stutter step toward always-on, consumer-controlled media. But it is less paradigm shift than software application, a way for consumers to set up downloads of their favorite audio material and hear it at their leisure.

The technology works like this: Consumers find audio content on the Web they covet - it could be a one-man séance from someone's basement, a public radio station they enjoy or an audio feed from a television talk show they hate to miss.

Through relatively simple means, they can set up a regular feed from the source that magically appears on their desktops and can be downloaded to an MP3 appliance of their choosing, which is usually an iPod. It has been heralded as [TiVo](#) for radio, and while accurate, that is a fairly limited description.

Podcasting is also frequently described as an audio version of blogging, but it is essentially a delivery system that has none of the interactivity and dynamism that make blogging such a compelling and viral form of publishing. As in radio, they talk and you listen. Podcasting merely gives consumers the opportunity to time-shift and listen at their convenience.

In some instances, the impact has been profound. "On the Media," a media analysis program produced by the New York public radio station WNYC, has been podcast-friendly since January. They have picked up almost 40,000 new listeners a week, the equivalent of adding a major American city to their distribution.

"It has been phenomenal for us," said Brooke Gladstone, the co-host and managing editor of the show. "I shouldn't have been surprised, but I was."

While public radio shows have used podcasting to extend their reach, large media companies are exploring podcasting as a way to find new audiences and new talent. But what is seen as one more opportunity to publish may actually be more an opportunity to hear what is actually going on.

"The point of citizen media is not that there is one more platform to publish on" said Jeff Jarvis, who has a blog at BuzzMachine.com and advises several large media companies on their new-media strategy, including The [New York Times](http://NewYorkTimes.com). "Big media already owns the printing press and the broadcast tower. It is their turn to listen."

Mr. Jarvis has a point. Just because there is a new avenue does not mean that media should take a left and head down that street. In New York, WINS-AM 1010 is about to make a daily podcast available, but it seems a bit beside the point. It has been said that nothing ages faster than the future and the idea of listening to four-hour-old news and traffic hardly seems to have significant appeal.

So far, podcasting has been very sexy, but not profitable. Rush Limbaugh may make a few additional nickels by delivering podcast to members of his 24/7 Club, but, over all, podcasting is yet another media modality in search of a business plan.

The very specific charms of podcasting - its freshness and unexpectedness - make it a difficult business proposition. More often than not, when big media steps into the fray, the outcome reaffirms the fact that they have a finite set of skills. (For proof positive, download an audio version of this column at nytimes.com/media.) And like much of the Web, podcasting is virulently anticommercial. People who take the time to download programming are not going to be interested in a lot of advertising. And if they do get it, they can easily skip it by hitting fast forward.

AND if someone were to figure out how to do something besides extending their brand by podcasting, they would still need to get past the delicate issue of copyright. The recorded music industry has a very real stake in making sure that what is downloaded by consumers to be heard at their convenience - Infiniti Broadcasting has an all-podcast station in San Francisco - is bought and paid for. By definition, podcasting allows consumers to download and save recorded material. If podcasting catches on in a big way, there will be some serious discussions and probably numerous lawsuits to determine whether podcasting is merely an extension of an existing medium or its own thing altogether.

For the time being, podcasting is a cipher, a technology that seems to further threaten established media's stranglehold on public consciousness, but offers little opportunity in the way of a real actual business. Big media are aggressively attempting to get their arms around the next big thing. But it remains elusive, a medium that is viral and uncontrollable by nature, and that does not threaten to become a business any time soon.