# Five minutes with Martin Zaltz Austwick: "Our Head of Department sees academic podcasting as a key component in our impact and communication strategy."

by Blog Admin                                                                                          December 2, 2011

*The merits of academic blogging and tweeting have been discussed widely, but what about academic podcasting? Martin Zaltz Austwick shares his experiences and tips in this post, introducing us to the wonderful world of podcasting. All you need is a decent idea, a decent microphone, and you're off!*

At the beginning of November I ran a rather fun workshop in Cardiff called "Podwhating?" (not my title) – dedicated to academic podcasting. Several years of podcasting and talking to people about podcasts (including the brilliant participants at the podcast workshop) has given me a lot of ideas about what a podcast is and isn't, which I'd like to share with you.

But before I do that, it seems appropriate to explain why an ex-physicist lecturing at UCL's Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis is telling people about podcasts. Well, I am or have been involved in several. The first, Answer Me This!, is a decidedly unacademic podcast (although one which relies on public engagement) – an independent comedy podcast based on listener questions. We've been going for five years and in that time won a Sony Gold and accumulated tens of thousands of regular listeners, all from our living room in Crystal Palace. On the university side, I worked on Bright Club podcast in its first year, and more recently co-founded The Global Lab, UCL-CASA's in-house podcast focussed on cities, global complexity and the impacts of technology. All of these have taught me different things about format, editing, community-building and how to balance making the damn episodes with all the other responsibilities and obligations a modern researcher/human being has.

So without further ado, let me introduce you to the wonderful world of podcasting…

1) **Podcasts are not "sexy".** They are no longer the buzz word they were five years ago, or that 'blog' was two years before that. People will not be impressed by "your new podcast" any more than they would be by "your new automobile" or "your new Teflon pan". But podcasts aren't unsexy in the way MySpace or Google Wave is; they haven't (yet) been superseded, they're just not new. They are, however, as effective a way of delivering speech content to the largest number for the smallest budget as you will find – as effective, perhaps, as blogs are for text.

2) **Podcasting is cheap.** You can basically do it for free. You can do very good ones with access to cheap equipment (microphones, etc). The editing software you are likely to want to use is free (Audacity on a PC, GarageBand on a Mac); the Internet hosting services (Podbean, libsyn) are cheap or free. This means you can be as niche in your subject matter as you like. This does not mean being niche in your presentation – if you intend to engage non-specialists, you will need to make your work interesting and accessible. But it does mean you can focus on something more specific to your subject area than "the social sciences" if you want to. At the workshop last week, we had people interested in talking about illegal drugs, shipping, university events, Thai tourism and science policy, among a wide variety of topics.

3) **With this is mind, start now**. Get podcasting. The sooner you start, the sooner you'll get better, build

an audience, overcome technical hurdles, create a back catalogue of work, learn, improve, enjoy. No-one starts good – so start now.

4) **There *are* some technical hurdles to overcome**. Don't worry about those. Every step of the process is, by now, set up to have the user in mind. GarageBand was designed by Apple to allow every spotty suburban US teenager to be Phil Spector – you'll manage fine. For more detailed and technical advice, you can visit my posts on the topic, and Elizabeth Hauke also has some very useful advice.

5) **Regularity and persistence are important**. Sure, you can get a podcast on iTunes and only ever produce one episode a year, or ever. But the strength of a listener having a new show delivered to their Internet-enabled POrtable Device (I use the handy acronym IPOD – which I use to mean iPhone or Samsung or Zune and whatever Android is currently a la mode) is that they come to expect the new show every day, or week, or fortnight – and this is one way podcasting helps you to build an engaged audience.

6) **Podcasting is *a bit* like broadcasting**. In the sense that you're probably producing speech-based content for other people to listen to. Hopefully a few of them. If you want to make the project two-way, you have to build in mechanisms to do that – in Answer Me This!, listener questions and other listeners' responses to their questions make it a genuinely two-way (and three-way) experience. By default, podcasting is one-way.

7) **Podcasting is *not a lot like* broadcasting**. Your show will not be beamed to the goggle box in the centre of every home, so you have to find audiences. Or create them. Word of mouth is valuable, but think about using social media, cross-promotion and reaching out to existing communities. On the Global Lab, we try to discuss and connect with events, researchers and initiatives in the field – to bring their work to our audience and hopefully, in the process, attract some of theirs. In the world of indie music, this is sometimes referred to as "spreading the love".

8 ) **Podcasting can be as time-consuming as you want to make it**. If you intend to make a daily discussion-based podcast where you do everything and edit 1 hour of raw audio down to 30 minutes - good luck. You'd be better advised to work within your limitations. I have a very supportive Head of Department that sees Global Lab as a key component in CASA's impact and communication strategy (thanks, Andy!) -  but if your HoD is less stellar, you may not find much time in working hours to complete it. Even if you do, you need to balance your input to the project with things like teaching, research and the others elements of your job. At this point, make your life easier – I'm a big believer that creativity flourishes within constraints, so work out how to achieve your goal in a simpler way, or scale it back a bit. You'll find yourself asking questions like: could it be shorter? Could it be once a week rather than every day? What about once a fortnight? What if other researchers did it every other week? What if they did the editing for me, or we alternated? What if someone else could be responsible for the website and social media? Could we record for 30 minutes rather than an hour? Could it be more scripted so the editing time is less (although the writing/performance time might be more)? Can I develop a streamlined workflow which gets it out the door faster once it's edited and converted to an mp3? Do I know people with existing skills or equipment that could make this easier and better?

9) **Make content -  make it good**. Once you've got going, have dealt with technical issues, and start to connect with a community/audience, it's essential to do good stuff. In your early days, if you're a bit rubbish, people will ignore you -  so don't be afraid to start out strong. Equally well, if you're still a bit rubbish a year later, people will do the same. You won't generate positive word-of-mouth, and people who do find you will wonder what the fuss is about. So try to get better all the time, remembering that everyone starts off a bit rubbish.

10) **Podcasting is not like academic work**, where you spend a long time figuring out what some very clever people have said and done, trying to get your head around that, and then tentatively start to add incremental value to their body of knowledge. The best podcasters have a decent idea, some decent microphones, and enough application that they've learned to be good at talking into them. That should be well within your abilities.

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