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Kathleen P. King
Fordham University

Sharon R. Sanquist

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Case Study of Empowerment through New Media Among Underrepresented Groups: GLBT Adults Gain Dominant Voice in the First Wave of Podcasting

Kathleen P. King
Fordham University
New York, New York

Sharon R. Sanquist
Caldwell College
Caldwell, New Jersey

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Abstract: The podcasting movement is frequently described as “Democratization of the Media.” This case study research about gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) podcasters from late 2004 to early 2008 reveals and characterizes how podcasting has yielded results of empowerment, voice, and a new media force.

Introduction

In late 2004 a new media called audio blogging was born and quickly became known as podcasting. At the same time a vast group of underrepresented adults used this media, even dominated it in the first year, in order to be heard around the globe. Podcasting is the recording and distribution of audio content via the Internet and an RSS (rapid simple syndication) feed. Podcasts are usually created in a serial format; that is they have a topic and continue for several related episodes. They are distributed via a “push” technology which enables episodes to be automatically sent to the listener, rather than users having to visit a website and retrieve each one. Since 2006, wide social adoption of this distribution occurred on a broad scale. It has been made possible by listeners using podcatching software such as the familiar iTunes or Zune and newer web browsers (Internet Explorer 7.0 and Mozilla’s Firefox) which include integrated RSS bookmark features.

This movement started off on Labor Day weekend 2004 with a small group of people jamming, recording and amateur disc jockeying (DJ). Within a few months, there were 100s of podcasters and listeners (Walch & Lafferty, 2006). Fast forward to late 2007 to see over 1 million podcasts linked to just one site (Feedburner, 2007). This surge in numbers partly was driven by the sale of over 100 million iPods as of September 2007 (Kiptronic, 2007). With such a wide scale adoption of podcasting, it is significant for researchers and students of adult learning to understand why and how the GLBT community has identified and made use of this communication tool. Indeed, it has become a transformative learning experience for many of them as they explore different roles, sexual identities, and personas. This paper provides an introduction to this research study and a sector of its findings.

Purpose of the Study

The Need

Why was this means of creating music and voice content on portable and computer based format so widely popular among young groups of westerners in particular? And who were the early adopters? What did they have to gain from their efforts? In some cases what were the risks they faced? And why face them? The podcasting movement has been widely characterized with the battle cry of “Democratization of the Media.” Therefore, it is consistent to assert that claiming and finding one’s

voice, free from political, social, economic, industry (music and broadcasting), and religious constraints from many sides is a galvanizing value.

This study explores, documents and analyzes the experience of the first two critically formative years of this new media of podcasting when so many independent individual, noncommercial ventures stepped in to claim their voice and come out of the shadow of being unheard. We identified a definite pattern that the two largest segments in this first wave of podcasts were music, and gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) podcasts. Of particular interest to the adult learning field is why the group which is underrepresented in mainstream media leaped to such an immediate adoption of this technology, and what has happened since.

Research Questions

Meaning: What has this meant for the hundreds of people who have used podcasting as a journal of their GLBT sexual identity development? Extent: Has podcasting resulted in temporary-only “on the air” empowerment? Or does it have gains that reach other areas of their lives and if so which areas? Persistence and Obstacles: Have the GLBT podcasters continued their podcast work at a greater or less frequency than other topic shows? What are reasons specific to GLBT podcasters for stopping a podcast (the usual being time demands, lack of novelty, lack of funds, lack of interest, etc. (Walch & Lafferty, 2006))? GLBT Podcast Genre Development: What characterizes development of the GLBT podcasting genre from 9/2004-9/2007?

Theoretical Bases

In understanding this trend of GLBT presence and proliferation in the new media, we used several literatures as our theoretical base. The transformative learning literature provided the foundational framework as a comprehensive approach to adult’s continuing to learn about themselves, their world and new technologies (Cranton 1994; King, 2002, 2003, 2005, Mezirow, 1978; O’Sullivan, 1999). The central premises and stages which were so informative for this research included the space this model provides to understand adult’s “exploring new roles” and “trying them out.” Being able to build on prior transformative learning and sexual orientation development research and perspectives, (Brooks & Edwards, 1997; King & Biro, 2006) was invaluable in providing a solid context for this study of innovative media in that we were reaching into areas with new possibilities for adult learning.

We used not only the broader literature on sexual orientation development (Strong & Others, 2008), but also that which has been grounded in the adult learning field Hill (2006). The literature from queer theory (Hill, 2006) is vital for this study because of the essential political and social empowerment issues that emerged quickly. Queer theory focuses on these issues and guided understanding empowerment of this specific underrepresented group.

Research Method

Using a case study model, this research was guided by qualitative inquiry (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1997). This research provides a case study analysis of a social dynamic trend, empowerment of adults, and technology innovation and adoption which indicates changes rooted in adult learning theory and research. Additionally, one researcher has been podcasting since June 2005 and serves as an expert participant observer of the trends researched (Creswell, 1998). Specifically, she provides integral insight into the technology, context, and meaning of new media (King & Gura, 2007).

Our data gathering methods included primary document examination and evaluation via a research rating system we established to document the source of information, frequency of listings, duration of the series over months and years, host and possible partnership/organizational relationships,

and website reviews. The general podcast directories also led us to several prominent GLBT and queer podcasting directories in which we were able to observe additional developments in the trends of the GLBT podcasting community across the period under research.

The observations from the GLBT directories were identified as separate sources of podcasts from those in directories, because they likely had a smaller distribution (not to a general audience). We also selected GLBT podcaster with which to conduct follow up interviews based on their prominence, longevity and contribution to the field of podcasting in general and to the trends which emerged in the research.

Information regarding the content, profiles and history of 85 podcasts were examined from 6 different podcast directories (Podcast Pickle, Podcast Alley, iTunes, Podcast 411, Libsyn, and Rainbow Radio). In addition, 8 interviews were conducted over several months. These data were analyzed through tabulation, frequencies and constant comparison for emergent themes (Creswell, 1998). The emergent themes were identified through the qualitative analysis and coding method used in this research study, determining emergent themes by constant comparison (Borg, Gall, & Borg, 1996; Creswell, 1998). This analysis was pursued until the data had been theoretically saturated (Borg, Gall, & Borg, 1996). That is, analysis by constant comparisons was continued until all data was analyzed for possible themes and the occurrence of each theme in all of the data.

Findings

This research revealed that the findings are extremely revealing not only to transformative learning, and sexual orientation development, but also with specific implications of empowerment among individuals and groups, potential for social change, and the impact of media participation. Upon examining each of the research questions, we not only saw themes emerge from among the data for each question, but we also grouped the findings as related to the theoretical bases because this would be very instructive for the different fields that intersected this study.

Meaning of the Experience

Based on our responses from podcasters and primary documents evidence, we explored the meaning of the GLBT podcasting experience. Their descriptions of creating and distributing their broadcasts of their own choice repeatedly included references to development of identity, voice, empowerment, affirmation, challenge and confrontation. This empowerment took place during the rapid emergence of podcasting. By summer 2005 all podcasters, GLBT podcasters included, were suddenly in a frantic race for who would reach the top of the podcast directory listings first. “Wannabe DJs” (disc jockeys) were the first to be validated. Therefore, this grassroots new media was dominated by musicians, DJs and “spin doctors” of all variations. However, simultaneously an increasing proliferation of GLBT talk shows, self talk and glamour girl shows also streamed forth into the listings.

From the data, it is evident that the technology format of podcasting and distribution via the Internet enabled GLBT and all podcasters to preserve their anonymity if they so chose. In this fashion, they could either appropriate a stage name/avatar of an alternate personality or reveal their hidden self. In order to use an avatar identity podcasters would create a show title, an independent website or podcast account (such as with Libsyn one of the earliest podcast hosts), a username, and email address.

What did this mean for the GLBT podcasters? By using the pseudonym/avatar they had the opportunity for self expression to the largest and most public platform ever accessible without using television or radio. In addition, GLBT podcasters had a “safe” environment in which to explore and develop identity and voice. Listening to these early GLBT podcasts and following the development of their productions, one hears greater confidence, and risk taking. The results within the individual GLBT

podcaster's work and across the GLBT podcast genre are dramatic, including revealing podcast series as they transition in empowerment, confidence, voice and focus archived in these sites. The podcasts evolved from first, hesitant attempts to unbounded confidence, from self-talk to public education of critical issues, and from self-indulgence to activism.

Some of the shows field phone-in callers or respond to blog or email comments. As a group, the GLBT podcasters broadcasted and publicized not only positive feedback which affirmed their persona and voice, but also that which resulted in confrontation. The extreme difference in these situations compared to others is that the GLBT people were in command and able to dispense responses from a position of control rather than disempowerment.

Extent of GLBT Podcasting Impact

Very briefly we present here that the extent of the impact of GLBT podcasting is variable, but leans towards *sustained cross sectors*. Those participants who indicated they sensed empowerment through their podcasting revealed that what new gains they made through this experience eventually reached other areas of their lives. While testing an online persona of boldness, or homosexuality with anonymity, and receiving email and blog comments which affirmed them, they began to express some of these characteristics in their day to day life. Some took these expressions only to their social life, while others would extend to families or work. Indeed, the usual continuum of sexual orientated identity in different settings (King & Biro, 2006) is extended to a new realm with a different feedback loop added. And the rate of change, adoption and empowerment may be accelerated through the use of such a public medium.

Persistence and Obstacles

GLBT podcasters experienced many of the same persistence and obstacle issues as other podcasters, but some different social and personal dynamics emerged. The most common reason people stop podcasting has been because they did not realize at the beginning how much effort it included (King & Gura, 2007; Walch & Lafferty, 2006). Typical obstacles for podcasters include, time constraints, technology difficulties, their waned interest in the effort because of many reasons including lack of listeners or lack of responses from listeners. However, variations included confrontation from listeners, pressure from personal relationships and disjuncture in their lives. The last one is of particular interest as it connects with the theory of transformative learning in an informative way. In this case, podcasting has provided a means for GLBT participants to test their different personas and find that they did not fit. Once they came to that conclusion they withdrew. Others withdrew under this heading of disjuncture because they found such a *public* demonstration of their identity was not as comfortable to them, however these were few.

GLBT Podcast Genre Development

Five dimensions of GLBT podcast genre development were identified in this research and discussed here: scope, delivery, focus of series, identity, and matrix of stages. Regarding scope or subcategories, they may also have been listed within in mainstream podcast directories, as we have indicated, GLBT podcasts began primarily with humor, and talk show formats; Wanda Wisdom and Madge (Richard) Weinstein are examples of such models. Gradually the scope of GLBT podcasts has expanded to represent the broader interests of all podcast listeners and the societal understanding of the fuller life of GLBT individuals (that is it parallels awareness in concurrent U.S. legislation and elections on GL marriage, GL adoption rights, transgender issues, homophobia, GLBT harassment, GL sport stars, etc). Therefore, examining the directories of start dates of different GLBT podcasts and the

Rainbow Radio program guide across 2005-2008 reveals the emergence of GLBT music, politics and podcast networks. In 2005, the lists were dominated by GLBT self-talk, and public awareness. In 2006, there were greater numbers of podcasts for GLBT news, and activism and more networks. In 2007, the highest proliferation of all types of GLBT podcast included GLBT lifestyle podcasts for general audiences and not just GLBT. In fact, the listings in 2008 reveals a decrease in the GLBT podcasts on the GLBT networks, but a greater number within mainstream controlled directories such as iTunes.

As evidenced above, podcasting has afforded a distribution and availability of GLBT perspectives spanning global dimensions from Australia, to USA, UK to Asia. This distribution is not just international, but also from the most urban to remote rural communities. Isolation of GLBT individuals is being eliminated by being able to hear a wide variety of GLBT lifestyles through a medium without mainstream media filtering and in listening and viewing modes which can be private.

Delivery modes of the GLBT podcasts were dominated by monologue shows in 2004-2005. Yet the delivery modes of 2007-2008 include a larger number and greater success of the GLBT podcast, vidcast and entertainment networks in addition to the full spectrum of monologues, news panels, talk shows, disc jockeys, interviews, and seminars (e.g., financial literacy) and the stories and lives of GLBT people. Just as the podcasting media has developed in multiple dimensions during this time, the GLBT genre has mirrored this development and includes many of the innovators.

The focus of GLBT podcast series are varied, but at this point in time (2008) they may be grouped among the following areas: self exploration to self revelation, consciousness raising (Parents and Friends of Lesbians And Gays type series (PFLAG) or "That's So Gay" for youth) to activism to "shock jock", gay pornography to therapy, and personal learning to public education (e.g., legal education, STD awareness).

In considering the above dimensions together, we were also able to ascertain a matrix of stages of this genre development. During the time from 2004 to early 2008 we have seen GLBT podcasting evolve across three vectors of a matrix. These vector continuums are:

- Individual Podcasters – Organizational Productions,
- Solo Distribution (website) – First Wave Podcast Directories (Podcast Pickle, Podcast Alley) - GLBT Directories and Networks (Qpodder) - Mainstream Directories (iTunes, MS Zune network) – GLBT Entertainment Networks for General Audiences (The Gay Man's Therapist)
- Shock Effect – Consciousness Raising of All People – Activism for GLBT People

All of these stages move towards voice and empowerment. The development of GLBT podcasting as a genre is the development of an underrepresented group who has overcome societal and media silence and claimed their voices. In the process, they are charting their own course, individually, collectively and innovatively. The stages of transformative learning are seen in disorienting dilemmas witnessed in a plethora of trial and error, the testing of the new media waters, and the development of new perspectives as GLBT podcasters and community takes control of podcasting as a communication and community building vehicle they can continue to shape. In contrast to the traditional mainstream media controls, GLBT podcasting has been an innovative movement and developed its own media force. Rather than isolation, this new media provides the variety of GLBT podcasters a global platform.

Implications and Future Research

Additional research can span a variety of adult learning areas and related adult development, psychology and counseling topics in order to inform these fields about new dynamics and possibilities for empowerment and voice of oppressed groups including GLBT adults. This research illustrates that a significant voice of marginalized adults have risen through a new media. Not only have these

individuals benefited from their empowerment and opportunity for transformation, but their listeners have gained insight into those lifestyles, views and development as well. Future research could focus on how adult listeners benefit from these experiences in their own sexual identity development, diversity awareness and communication. Furthermore, the impact upon GLBT teens and adults who have been isolated could be studied as they listen to podcasts over a period of time (in rural areas for instance) to see how the GLBT media influences their identity development, well-being and decisions.

In addition, many of these podcasters developed extensive podcaster-listener feedback. While others, like Madge Weinstein and Wanda Wisdom of Qpodder.com, contribute by creating communities to support GLBT listeners, *and* podcasters. Close study of these dynamics could reveal similar information and provide insight into how remote dialogue in informal and non instructional settings may effect changes in the same areas. It is clear that researchers of adult development, adult learning and social psychology have rich communities of previously underrepresented groups to explore in new media. We can also hope this pattern of voice and empowerment bodes well for other groups who will find their voices through the technology possibilities of Web 2.0 and new media.

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