

The Podcast for This American Life

The podcast for This American Life allows listeners to download the the shows and listen to them at their discretion. The This American Life team contracts with a site called audible.com to distribute the shows to listeners who want to hear them. Despite calling their offering a podcast, however, it is not, at least in the normal sense of the word. A podcast refers to an online setup with an RSS feed that is regularly updated, can be subscribed to, and provides links to sound or video files that can be downloaded and watched by the subscriber. Audible.com and This American Life do not offer that. Instead, the show's team allows audible.com to receive money for allowing listeners to download the sound files to the computer from audible.com's web site. The only RSS file involved is one specific to the user which allows that user access to the shows they are interested in. Even odder than charging for a supposed podcast, the sound files downloaded are tied to the specific user who downloads them. Unlike the vast majority of podcasts, which allow the files to be distributed and redistributed as the end user wishes, without placing limitations on such, the This American Life podcast restricts the file to a single user.

The podcast for This American Life misses the point of what a podcast is intended to be, the free distribution of information. The This American Life team is exploiting the term podcasting, and the credibility and hipness that is associated with the term in order to boost their own popularity.

On the other hand, the podcast for This American Life may be where the rest of the industry is headed. Although the technology was first adopted by independent media groups that enjoyed it because of the low cost of distribution and the close possible ties to end users, that may change when podcasting becomes a wider phenomenon. If podcasting is adopted by more mainstream, corporate entities, the face of podcasting is likely to change to one where a profit plan is required. Audible.com's plan of forcing users to subscribe and

pay for the feeds they want may be the way the corporate world decides to latch on to and use podcasting. The advantage of podcasting, direct distribution of the media files to the user's home computer quickly and easily, is not lost if the system moves to one revolving around profit.

Regretfully, the podcast for This American Life is probably an example of what podcasting will be in a few years. As much as locked media files that restrict distribution may be repugnant to many of the free information activists that currently dominate podcasting, there is little to stop those who want to use the system to make a profit from doing so.

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