

Talk Radio Icon Says Ditto to Podcast

By Jon Healey
Times Staff Writer

June 4, 2005

The Rush is on.

Podcasting — delivering recorded audio programs through the Internet to iPods or other portable music players — lined up its biggest name yet Friday when talk radio icon Rush Limbaugh jumped into the field.

His move is the latest sign that the grass-roots podcasting movement is being invaded by commercial ventures and powerful brands. Others include nine AM news stations in Viacom Inc.'s Infinity Broadcasting chain, the BBC World Service and public stations KCRW-FM (89.9) in Santa Monica and WNYC in New York.

The influx of popular broadcasters could help push mainstream audiences to adopt the new medium, which emerged about a year ago as a hybrid of blogs and radio broadcasting.

Podcasting's steady rise also reflects how computers, digital video recorders and other digital technologies give individuals more control over media and entertainment, said analyst Phil Leigh of Inside Digital Media.

"Is the Internet a better way of delivering media than live broadcasts, scheduled broadcasts? And the answer is probably yes," Leigh said. "What TiVo is conditioning people to think is, I want my media when I want it.... Ultimately, media is going to be consumed on demand."

Podcasting began with people recording and using the Internet to distribute audio programs devoted to their hobbies, hot topics or music they had discovered. The movement was fueled by software that made it easy to beam a podcast from a home computer to anyone who signed up to receive it.

More than 6 million people in the United States have listened to a podcast, according to a recent survey by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, and more than 22 million people have portable players that could play them. But at least two important pieces of the podcasting picture are still missing.

Most podcasts are distributed free with no advertising support, so there is no established way to translate the programs into profits. And the major record companies and music publishers have yet to come up with licensing terms for podcasts that use their copyrighted works.

The copyright hurdle is a fundamental problem for would-be podcasters. Programs are typically recorded in the MP3 format, which is compatible with virtually every portable player.

But the major record labels have not allowed their music to be distributed as MP3s because the format can be copied freely.

In light of these complexities, radio stations are limiting their podcasts to news and talk shows. And Limbaugh stripped the music out of his podcasts, even the half-minute snippets at the beginning of each segment.

"You know, we pay a rights fee every year for the opening theme song, but it does not include the privilege of copying it hundreds of thousands of times for free so that people can have it on their computers," Limbaugh said, according to a transcript on his website.

Limbaugh's podcasts will be free to people who subscribe to his \$50-a-year online service.

He has more than 100,000 subscribers and nearly 20 million listeners to one or more of his shows each week, said Kraig Kitchin, chief executive of Premiere Radio Networks, the Clear Channel Communications subsidiary that syndicates Limbaugh's broadcasts.

The podcasts will include fewer commercials than Limbaugh's radio show, Kitchin said, because only the national spots will be included. But, he said, advertisers are interested in sponsoring podcasts and "will be happy to be time-shifted."

Joel Hollander, chief executive of Infinity Broadcasting, agreed.

"Advertisers are looking for new ways to reach consumers," he said. "We can't just sit here with our terrestrial signal and think technology's going to stop for us."

The audience for podcasts is small today, Kitchin said, but may not be for long.

"The speed of adapting to new technology by the consumer is not to be underestimated," he said. "I want to be sure to be right there at their door when they wake up and say, 'I want to try that.' "

News and talk radio stations may also see podcasting as a way to reclaim some of the listeners they have lost to cable TV channels and Internet news outlets, said Sean Ross, vice president of music and programming for Edison Research.

For example, by letting people listen to his show on demand instead of in his usual time slot, Limbaugh may attract "people who didn't have the energy to give him in the middle of the workday," Ross said.

He added that the radio stations' desire to protect their audience was far different from the original spirit of podcasting, which was to democratize broadcasting by giving anyone with a computer the power to broadcast their musings around the globe.

Copyright 2005 Los Angeles Times

<http://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-podcast4jun04,1,831302.story?coll=la-headlines-business&ctrack=1&cset=true>