

## **Catching the buzz at PodTech -a taste of tomorrows newsroom**

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From editorial filters to instant feedback from informed readers. From circulation-figures to buzz among bloggers and the sharing that social media creates.

Welcome to what could be tomorrows media-world. Here individuals can – and will - publish their work on online-based platforms and participate in the conversations they fuel. I've had a first taste of it at PodTech Network in Palo Alto.

While traveling to California to participate in the Innovation Journalism-program I came across an article in an airline magazine. It was about a new book that told the story of extinct products. One of them is the typewriter that was common goods when I grow up. Another is the manual handle that was used to bring up the window in a car.

The line of outdated technical stuff was long. The story made me think about my own profession, about the innovation process that's going on within journalism when it comes to content, technology and business-models – and what I was about to learn from working at PodTech.

A few days later I entered PodTechs headquarters in Palo Alto. The office was quiet, yet with a creative feeling to it. Children's drawings on the door. Big cushions on the floor. Giant supplies of snacks and drinks.

Being a reporter at Sweden's National News Agency TT I had covered economics, international politics, terrorism and been a correspondent in the United Nations during the invasion of Iraq. I had produced TV-documentaries, interviewed kings, queens and secretaries – but I had never set foot in Silicon Valley.

Before my journey I did some research on PodTech, a media network and platform for podcasts of video, audio and blogs. But I had not seen the business-model and by looking at the homepage I didn't quite understand how the company was structured. I was curious about the more than 30 clients the homepage talked about, journalistic ethics in a world where you have a close relationship to the companies you cover, how the production-work was structured and if the company made money.

### **"Quality has legs"**

A coffee with engineer and product manager Min Li Chan cleared some of the fog. It turns out PodTech has two major divisions. One produces paid content for a number of corporate clients that is posted both on PodTech's homepage and distributed internally within the companies themselves. Many refer to the division as "bread and butter".

The other division is the sponsor-side which is called the Producer Network – a network of professional video and media producers. It has a number of profile producers creating independent video- and audio podcasts/blogs. The idea is to finance their work with sponsorships from various companies. It is sometimes described as a YouTube for professional video producers.

When I arrived, in May 2007, PodTech had over 30 video-producers and was looking to add bloggers. The most well-known profile was and is former Microsoft-blogger and geek-star Robert Scoble who does a popular videoblog on new technology called The ScobleShow. His show is sponsored by Seagate – which made me wonder if he can be critical of Seagate.

PodTech also produces events and has contracts with outside producers – content partners - who post their podcasts through PodTechs network. The PodTech homepage was being remodeled and launched as I wrote this. The initial editorial areas to post under (the beats covered) were to be

enterprise 2.0, social media, clean tech and digital entertainment – and the difference between commissioned and independent content was to be even clearer stated.

PodTechs CEO John Furrier – an entrepreneur, engineer, businessman and a pioneer podcaster himself – tells me PodTech has coined the phrase ”commissioned” to highlight the difference between paid and editorial content. He describes it as an evolution in their path to becoming a global media company. The need for separation between editorial and paid content remains a vital part of the Web 2.0 media business, how that is implemented is directly related to the dynamics and role of the online audiences, according to John Furrier.

A few days later, after having chatted with several people, I draw the conclusion that PodTech itself does not produce traditional journalism. Instead the company does information or media-content - and of course builds the platform to distribute it from. However some of the content partners have more of a journalistic profile. And John Furrier has lots of plans relating to journalism and news. There are many things a journalist (or media-worker) can learn about how to practice in the environments of web 2.0 by working at PodTech.

”We are at the early stages of a revolution, the Internet is now a business-model for many companies,” Furrier states.

”In this world ideas and quality win. It’s all about word of mouth - quality has legs, crap doesn’t.”

### **From edgy to slow**

On the homepage PodTech is described as a media network fueling conversations among influential producers, audiences and advertisers. Furrier’s vision is to combine the best of three worlds: traditional media (like New York Times), citizen media (created by its users, like bloggers) and machine media (machine based aggregators such as Google News and Techmeme.com, where an algorithm ranks stories based on how many - and how influential - people link to them and how many readers they have). He says PodTech is providing media to a market that is currently underserved.

”The Internet has room for edgy, controversial content as well as profound, slow stories – stories that might not make it into today’s mainstream networks,” he states.

PodTech does not have a traditional newsroom, instead they are building an algorithm that will filter out the best stories of the day, in terms of content, buzz and conversations.

One critical issue, however, is the audience’s time. Busy people can’t consume everything on the vast Internet, there will be a need for new filters, assimilations, search engines - and commentary. One of my assignments from John Furrier is therefore to create a daily assimilation (a summary with a bit of analysis to it), catching the story of the day among professional bloggers, relevant companies and traditional newsmedia. The story is to be posted on PodTechs blog and linking to other bloggers/sources is a key (as it fuels sharing and further conversations). A source for the story is Techmeme.

As I keep doing this, John Furrier monitors the blog stats seeing how many people view and link to the posts. An important factor is that Podtech is considered an influential and authoritative voice on the Internet based upon the new algorithms being developed in search- and blog-aggregation sites such as Techmeme. So when PodTech participates in a conversation and links to specific stories the PodTech name shows up in the discussion for other readers to click at (and thereby join the conversation).

### **New words**

Working at PodTech I find myself changing vocabulary. In the TT newsroom we discuss breaking news, objectivity and if a source is reliable. At PodTech we talk about cross-linking and social and sharing media. Also, most of the content producers here work on their own. There are no staff-meetings in the morning, not very much structure (yet) when it comes to booking equipment, no

writing-rules and no editorial filters. You post what you post – if you're wrong the readers will tell you about it, Robert Scoble explains to me a few days later.

"The audience is smarter than I am, they have more sources than I have. The audience is the editorial board," he says.

Having one of the highest ranked videoshows and blogs, Scoble is all online – going through 622 RSS-feeds several times every day.

"I don't think people will read news on paper 50 years from now. But people like the brands, they will live and adopt into the online-world," he says.

"Eventually a cheaper form of distribution will kill the more expensive."

New media disrupts the business-model of the traditional newspaper. The classified ad - that used to be the bread and butter of a newspapers - migrate to sites like craigslist.org, ebay.com and monster.com. This also happens with the advertisers of display ads.

"If I had a small camera-store, would I rather pay for an ad in the local newspaper or an ad online at Google where I know I'll reach more educated and richer people," Scoble asks.

### **Online-lessons**

So what would a future journalist or media-company working online need to know about the web 2.0-environment?

One important thing is to understand how traffic gets driven on the Internet through word of mouth-sites like Techmeme, Digg and Stumbleupon. Another is how to get search engines to pay attention to your article (for example don't write headlines that don't match how people will search for your article). You also need to get more concerned about who and where your audience is and how to communicate with them.

Another aspect is the world of bloggers, to realise that you're fighting - or collaborating - with them. Bloggers without editorial filters or boards are likely to be faster than you when a story breaks (although their texts could contain errors or typing mistakes...).

"If a blogger beats you he gets all the inbound traffic," Scoble points out.

"And if he's wrong he can always change it later down the road."

Other lessons include understanding the power of linking and knowing how algorithms work – and to not forget the importance of meeting people face to face sometimes. Networking, going to conferences and events builds your brand and credibility. Scobles advice is to keep the journalistic workflow and craft going but to learn what works on the Internet.

So - does he view himself as a journalist?

"Sometimes. My blog is not but it can be. I do break news. And if a building next to me went on fire I would report on it."

However the fact that he is sponsored by Seagate does affect his reporting.

"I like to think that it doesn't but it's a bias," he says.

"Would I write something nasty without a cause? No. If they really messed up I would probably let somebody else write it and link to it. It depends on the situation."

Later the same day I discuss ethics with Paul Sherer, head of business development. He stresses the fact that PodTech aims to be useful, not promotional. The collection of industry experts that consume the content may act as a watch-guard, it's users often commenting among themselves if something is believed to be wrong.

### **Innovation is the key**

PodTech is a clear example of ongoing innovation within journalism – or at least media – with producers working with new tools, through new networks, covering new beats. Paul Sherer views the network as a guide or a user manual to the new media-world – where the actual inventors of this world get to be the mentors (i e the people featured in the podcasts). In that way it can result in both commercial and philanthropical benefits.

In a way, PodTech is all about covering innovation in the sense the creation of new things or ideas

and how they reach their market/audience. To John Furrier innovation-coverage is an important aspect of the podcasts going through his network.

"Innovation cuts across everything in this digital environment we're living in. It effects reporting, the media, the companies and our lifestyle," he says.

A key to success is of course employing the right people. John Furrier does not necessarily look for journalists but for smart people with good networks and ideas who are willing to break the rules. As of now about 40 people are employed and another 40 are contracted content-producers. Paul Sherer expects the latter group to grow very fast.

PodTech was funded in 2005 with capital from US Venture Partners and Venrock Associates.

Today it has a good flow of income, and the company believes that it will break even sometime this year. PodTech's revenue is in the millions per year, says John Furrier.

When it comes to marketing, it is all online or through events. Robert Scobles show of course draws lots of traffic. Making sure that posts are high up on Google's searchengine and crosslinks are other ways of marketing. Comments, links or posts under PodTechs name in the blogosphere and at sites like Techmeme generates traffic. PodTech also employs an embeddable flashplayer similar to YouTubes. As of now PodTechs player is embedded in more than 3 200 different sites. The player gets millions of views per month.

In a way PodTech grows organically. In this initial phase people who talk to people on the Internet are bloggers and producers. By communicating and interacting with these PodTech will also reach their audiences – and the viewers/readers of them. There are no limits. The last groups are those still unconnected in the development world.

### **Facing the future**

After a few more days at PodTech I'm starting to be familiar with the company, its employees and its productions. Over the office-cubicles I ask for views on the future of media. Some colleagues anticipate that the us versus them-perspective will be taken away. Ethics and transparency will be fundamental, official people like politicians, business-leaders and delegates at the UN could be wired with small head-cameras. An official person not wanting to give away his daily doings might make a viewer suspicious.

John Furrier talks about the open sources that the Internet provides. One effect is that many people can collaborate on a story at the same time (like at Wikipedia). Journalism in the future can and will therefore be more about collaboration.

He also sees a changing role for the editor in traditional media. In the emerging blogosphere hundreds of bloggers act as independent editors and many work together, something he calls open source media.

"This dynamic changes the life cycle and the economics of news. News can break faster and the quality of conversations, analysis and final new products is far superior to that of the traditional newsroom," he says.

John Furrier also sees the global market as an important factor in the future of media, stressing that diversity is a big asset in the global blogosphere.

So what can a more traditional newsroom like my home-base TT learn from PodTech? Below I've tried to summarize some of the lessons as a checklist for the future.

#### **-Technology and the media:**

It's a fact that media in the future will be produced and consumed online. We will see new tools and new media products. The faster the organizers of a newsroom adapt to this, the better. On an individual level there's a lot to learn when it comes to online traffic, searching, interacting and acting on the webb. Robert Scobles advice on this is useful. I've summarized it down to:

Understand how online traffic gets driven and how to get search engines to pay attention to your work, get more concerned about who your audience is and learn about the world of bloggers, the

power of linking and how algorithms work.

It's also a question of attitude, to not be afraid to work with or to cover new technology.

-Covering innovation and new beats:

Many traditional newsrooms cover the same beats as they did in the 60-ies. I think it is interesting to watch a new media-company like PodTech and see how they cover entrepreneurship, marketing voices, social media, clean tech and digital entertainment. In a way it is all about innovations and the present world. Some beats could easily be added to my home newsroom.

-The journalist/worker:

The media-worker of tomorrow could be an analyzing or commenting person as well as a blogger with a strong, personal voice. Judging from the action at PodTech I think it is a good idea to learn to work in multiple medias (write articles, blog, podcast video and audio). You need to be open to new technical solutions. Also – to keep up the speed - you might need to deal with several crafts including shooting, editing and posting a video. A natural observation is that this might distract the journalist from focusing on the important task of asking questions.

-Business-models and ethics:

I think PodTech's model of sponsorship works in an extreme environment like Silicon Valley, where you might need to have a close relationship with the companies you cover. However I don't think it works when you report on war and peace or do more "hardcore" journalism.

When it comes to the individual journalist, in the future he or she could become a free blogger and sell ads on the blog. Former Financial Times-reporter Tom Foremski, working through his blog SiliconValleyWatcher and PodTech, is a good example.

Also, in the future it is likely that we'll see more open source media (similar to C-Spans broadcasts from Congress). This gives the viewer and the reporter equal opportunities to cover an issue. Future media-companies need to have a strategy on what to do when it comes to open source media and user-generated content.

The story above is a subjective observation based on my first few weeks as innovation journalism-fellow at PodTech. They were intense, fun and interesting. The text does not cover the full picture, but I think it serves as a starting point for discussing innovation within journalism, the coverage of innovation and the future of our profession.

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