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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 regularily 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 curently 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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