

White Paper Report

Report ID: 98556

Application Number: HD5011407

Project Director: Brita Zitin (brita@mainehumanities.org)

Institution: Maine Humanities Council

Reporting Period: 4/1/2007-3/31/2009

Report Due: 6/30/2009

Date Submitted: 9/15/2010

WHITE PAPER

NEH Digital Humanities Start-Up Grant HD-50114-07

Humanities on Demand

Podcasting as a Tool for Public Humanities Education

<http://mainehumanities.org/podcast>

A project of the

Maine Humanities Council

674 Brighton Avenue, Portland, Maine 04102

Project Director: Brita Zitin (brita@mainehumanities.org)



Contents

Background.....	2
Launch.....	2
Development.....	3
Audience.....	5
Legal Considerations.....	5
Tools.....	6
Next Steps.....	8
Appendix A: Partners.....	9
Appendix B: Promotional Materials.....	10
Appendix C: Legal Release.....	11

Background

The Maine Humanities Council has been sponsoring public humanities programming for over 30 years. The impact of our programs continues once the scholar and participants leave the room, as audiences integrate what they learn from one another and from scholars into their work and daily lives. Yet the ephemeral nature of our offerings means that potential participants who miss the opportunity to attend in person, due to distance or time constraints, will never be able to recover the experience.

Advances in online streaming media technology inspired Council staff to research and apply for a Start-Up grant from the Office of Digital Humanities in November 2006. The project was intended to be a test of podcasting capability and an exploration of the technology's potential. The application acknowledged that the current audience for podcasts was small, but cited its projected growth, particularly among young people, as support for the project. It also invoked Maine's significant investment in technology, including the Learning Technology Initiative in public schools and the information architecture used by public libraries in Maine InfoNet. The concrete goal put forward in the application was an archive of audio recordings that would reside on the Council's website and remain available indefinitely, free of charge, to anyone who had a computer and an Internet connection. The grant was awarded and began six months later, in April 2007.

Launch

When the Digital Humanities Start-Up grant was awarded, the Maine Humanities Council had already begun to collect audio recordings for eventual dissemination online. A consultant from the SALT Institute for Documentary Studies had assisted with the production of a CD called "Maine Writers Speak," which collected interviews previously aired on Maine Public Broadcasting. There were ten interviews in all, each around ten minutes long. Another early piece available for testing was "Taxing Maine," the award-winning play that was performed throughout Maine in 2006. A volunteer for the Theatre at Monmouth had offered his radio studio for the actors to record their performance, and then donated his professional editing skills.

Consultant Donna Jones of West End Webs created a page within the Council's website to contain this initial store of material. It was reasonably simple to code and style the page, using tables to organize the MP3 audio file, photograph, and written description for each recording. At this point, listeners had two options: they could press the play button on a simple Flash player to listen to the recording online, or they could download the MP3 file to their computer and listen later, possibly using a portable media player such as an iPod. These options were explained on a linked "FAQ" page, which is still visible at <http://mainehumanities.org/podcasts/faq.html>.

However, for a collection of audio recordings to qualify as a podcast, they must be syndicated. Jones researched and built an XML file that added RSS capability to the site. The *Humanities on Demand* podcast officially launched in November 2007, with a promotional campaign consisting of a press release, newsletter article, and e-mail blast, as recommended by advisory committee member Gillian Britt of gBritt Public Relations.

Using the Edirol R-09 and Audacity (see “Tools” for more on this and other equipment and software referred to in this section), Council staff began to record and edit lectures, readings, and interviews to add to the podcast. Brita Zitin met with advisory committee members for input on content, including Steve Podgajny, Director of the Portland Public Library. The largest public library in Maine hosts some of the most renowned authors who come through the state on book tours in the Brown Bag Lecture Series. Those events were the first sponsored by an entity other than the Council to be incorporated, and the loyal Brown Bag Series audience responded positively to the opportunity to listen to lectures they’d missed. (They did not, as some had feared, choose to stay home and listen rather than going in person to the lectures they could attend!)

Promotional efforts during the first months of the podcast were concentrated on links to other sites and listings in various podcast directories. The descriptions that accompanied each episode were carefully composed to link to—and encourage links back from—authors, publishers, universities, other nonprofit organizations, and other pages within the Council’s website. Key listings included the Gateway to Digital Collections at the University of Maine library (<http://libraries.umaine.edu/gateway>) and the iTunes store. The Council’s designer created an icon for the podcast, which was printed along with an article in the print newsletter, and also on business cards with the podcast URL.

Development

In the first six to eight months of the project, *Humanities on Demand* gradually gained ground within the organization as a viable method of content dissemination. Several members of the Council staff have learned how to use the Edirol R-09, although the majority of the recording and editing remains the responsibility of the project director. There was no shortage of opportunities to capture content for the podcast, or re-purpose content originally created for other outlets. In an effort to expand offerings for children and families, a staff member recorded a staged reading of picture books by Maine author Amy MacDonald, performed by actors from Portland Stage Company. Then, to fill a gap in material from the distant northern border of the state, the Council got permission to post excerpts from *Voici the Valley*, an audio tour of the St. John Valley region that had previously been available only on CD.

Programs sponsored by the Council remain the backbone of the podcast. Teacher professional development workshops are now routinely recorded and cross-promoted to teachers participating in other workshops. The *Literature & Medicine* program, which originated in Maine but has since spread to 28 states, is particularly well suited to take advantage of podcasting. Following the first national *Literature & Medicine* conference, one of the presenters sent an e-mail about the recordings she’d found on the site. “What a treat to listen to Rafael’s and Judy’s workshops,” she wrote, “both of which I was unable to attend during my time at the conference. Now I’m interested to listen to some of the others.”

In September 2007, while Washington, DC, for the project directors’ meeting for Digital Humanities Start-Up grants, Zitin visited the newly opened National Audio Visual Conservation Center of the Library of Congress in Culpeper, Virginia. Advisory committee member Brad McCoy, a senior studio engineer at the Library, provided a behind-the-scenes tour of the facility.

Another advisory committee member, Commissioner of Maine's Department of Education Susan Gendron, facilitated a connection with the Maine Learning Technology Initiative (MLTI). MLTI eventually became a crucial partner in the podcast project, helping to promote episodes to teachers and offering subscriptions through a dedicated portal on iTunes. (Maine is one of just a few states whose Department of Education is involved in the pilot of a new K-12 division of iTunes U.)

Another major partner, not anticipated in the grant application, joined the project in January 2008. The Stonecoast MFA program at the University of Southern Maine is a low-residency graduate program, and its students and faculty come together for just 20 days per year. Podcasting via *Humanities on Demand* allows the Stonecoast community to revisit these brief meetings during the periods of separation, while also granting public access to readings and events that are otherwise restricted.

Naturally, the opportunities that presented themselves didn't always materialize as successful recordings and partnerships. Several events at the Maine Historical Society were edited and prepared for posting before it became clear that staff capacity at that organization was insufficient to provide support materials such as photographs. (Instead, the much smaller Yarmouth Historical Society has offered some fascinating historical content.) Capturing events that are located beyond the reasonable travel range for Council staff remains a challenge. The Bangor Book Festival was one such event; a Festival organizer volunteered to record readings throughout the weekend, but the audio quality was so poor that the material had to be rejected. Quality concerns arise even with Council staff operating the equipment. Recordings from one event were left off the podcast, but posted to a different page on the website, along with a warning about their quality. That way, people who *really* wanted to hear them could suffer through the static and interference without subjecting podcast fans to the torment!

Among the goals articulated in the grant application was outreach to new audiences, including blind and housebound Mainers. A partnership with the Iris Network, a nonprofit serving Maine's blind and visually impaired residents, brought this goal within range. The Iris Network broadcast a PSA for *Humanities on Demand* on Maine AIRS, an information program broadcasting newspaper stories to individuals who are visually impaired or print disabled. Some material from *Humanities on Demand* was also incorporated into the Talking Books service of the Maine State Library.

As *Humanities on Demand* continued to grow, the site's original structure and back-end technology became unsustainable. The page took too long to load, and episodes were not organized in any logical way. After researching a variety of options with consultant Donna Jones, Council staff decided to transfer the podcast to a blog platform. The site is now run through WordPress, with episodes categorized by genre and also tagged for increased navigability. (For instance, there aren't enough recordings on the topic of politics to warrant a dedicated category, but if a listener enjoys the lecture from the Portland Public Library on Maine governor James G. Blaine, he or she can click the "politics" tag to bring up recordings of a speech by Huey Long, a scholar's talk on the Vietnam War, and author Sue Miller's reading from her novel *The Senator*, among others.) The new site was launched in February 2009.

Audience

Throughout the project, listeners have been invited to “talk back” to *Humanities on Demand*, originally with a linked blog (<http://humanitiesondemand.blogspot.com>) and now using the WordPress comments feature. Very few have taken advantage of this opportunity, possibly because the active listeners most likely to respond are subscribing to the podcast feed, and aren’t inclined to search out the site itself in order to leave a comment. Alternatively, it may be that podcast users are, in general, passive consumers of content rather engaged audiences. If that’s the case, the technology may *not* be as appropriate to public humanities education as the Council originally hoped.

The lack of feedback on the podcast is related to another persistent problem with the project: the inability to assess the size and make-up of the audience. It was easy (thanks to a tool called Feedburner) to determine that the number of subscribers hovers around fifty, but in spite of hours of research, staff and consultants have failed to find a reliable way to measure the larger audience that is accessing individual episodes. This is a crucial metric, because one of the most successful promotional strategies has been to link individual episodes or topics to pre-existing audiences. Wikipedia articles on authors or subjects, such as Huey Long or Richard Russo, have appeared in website analytics as points of entry to the podcast site. Some of the authors featured on the podcast, including Hannah Holmes and Christina Baker Kline, have put links from their websites to the episode in which they appear. Links from blogs have also driven traffic to specific episodes.

Promoting *Humanities on Demand* to listeners who are already web-savvy is a challenge, given the wide variety of podcasts available, but promoting it to those who aren’t comfortable online is a challenge of a higher order! Again, the most promising strategy seems to be the hook of a particular speaker or topic. If someone is disappointed at not getting off the waiting list for the popular Winter Weekend program, he or she will find a way to listen to recordings of the talks online even if technology seems a barrier. Terminology matters, too. Describing the project as “audio on demand” instead of using the word “podcast” makes it more approachable, and gets around the common misconception that one must have an Apple iPod in order to listen to a podcast. For older audiences (Maine has the oldest population of any state in the U.S.), a comparison to radio can also be effective: each episode of the podcast is like a great story on the radio, with the added convenience of being able to listen to what you want, when you want.

While the inability to measure the size or composition of the podcast audience is frustrating, it’s important to remember that the original vision for the project encompassed its potential as an historical archive. Even the material that is not highly *in* demand today will remain available *on* demand indefinitely, for anyone who wishes to hear it.

Legal Considerations

Two attorneys were consulted about intellectual property issues inherent in the *Humanities on Demand* project. Early in the project, advisory committee member Peter Webster recommended the disclaimer that appears on every page of the podcast: “Please be aware that the content in these audio files does not necessarily reflect the views, opinions, or policies of the

Maine Humanities Council or any organization with which the Maine Humanities Council is affiliated. Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in the podcast do not necessarily reflect those of the National Endowment for the Humanities.”

The first question of copyright arose from a performance for families during which a storyteller read several children’s books in their entirety. Read-alouds of children’s books have since become a standard feature of the podcast. Obtaining written permission for the readings becomes a two-step process when the publishers of the print editions have already sold the audio rights to third parties such as audiobook producers. One children’s book publisher, Candlewick, is particularly supportive of *Humanities on Demand* and other podcasts, responding to rights requests promptly and generously.

As the permissions maze became more confounding, Charles Bacall, a specialist on intellectual property, was hired as a consultant. He created two variations on a legal release for speakers or performers to sign for each recording. One version takes into account any published material that might be read in the course of the presentation, and asks the speakers to assure that they either own the copyright to that material or have obtained permission from the copyright owner; the other is more general, and is used for presentations that are entirely original. The language in these documents can be intimidating to those who aren’t familiar with legal terms, yet all of the speakers have agreed to sign.

The potential legal complexity of the project is further mitigated by the cooperation of partners, who are asked to take care of permissions for their own programs without the Council’s intervention. Those with the staff capacity (including the Portland Public Library and the University of Southern Maine) have both been willing to do so.

Tools

The equipment and software used to create *Humanities on Demand* was recommended by a variety of consultants and advisory committee members. Independent radio producer Rob Rosenthal was particularly generous with his advice in this area. Descriptions of the most useful tools follow.

Edirol R-09 – This digital recorder was selected for its reliability, size, and price. It records to a standard memory card and offers easy USB file transfer. Since it has a range of options for file size and type (from 64 kbps MP3 to 24-bit WAV), some experimentation was necessary before finding equilibrium between quality and size. A 4G SD card could handle the high-quality WAV files, but they would require a great deal of space on the office computers, so the general practice has been to record at the highest quality MP3 rate, 320 kbps. The Edirol’s built-in condenser microphone has proved its best feature. While external mics are unwieldy and easy to leave behind, this internal mic is always guaranteed to stay with the recorder. It certainly wouldn’t suffice for a professional-level recording, but for the purposes of a podcast, it’s adequate. The only disappointment with the Edirol was its hardness: after one machine’s built-in mic stopped working properly, it was passed on to the Portland Public Library (which used an external mic anyway) and a replacement purchased.

External microphones – In addition to the Edirol’s built-in mics, several external mics were purchased for specific situations.

- A basic clip-on lapel mic from Radio Shack proved useful when speakers were inclined to wander away from the podium. It was so inexpensive (around \$25) that no one was surprised the mic detached from the clip, and a simple duct-tape repair has made it useable again.
- A Microflex MX393 omnidirectional condenser boundary mic from Shure, together with the Phantom III 48V phantom power supply, rounded out the microphone collection. As the manufacturer explains, “MX300 Series microphones take advantage of the principle that at a barrier or boundary, the sound pressure level doubles.” The mic is thus capable of capturing sound at a wide range of frequencies. Furthermore, the model is designed to rest unobtrusively on a lectern, stage floor, or conference table, which makes the boundary mic particularly appropriate for recording discussions.

Audacity – A free audio editor available from <http://audacity.sourceforge.net>, Audacity is widely used and recommended by amateurs and professionals alike. The program is easy to learn, because most of its tools mirror those of a typical word processor (cut, copy, paste, etc.) while others (amplify, fade in/out) are self-explanatory. With practice, editing becomes even easier. At first, the project director spent about twice as long to edit a recording as the recording’s running time. (A one-hour program took two hours to edit.) Now, editing takes barely 1¼ times the running time. The most important Audacity tip is frequent saving, since the application (like so many software programs!) is prone to sudden crashes.

Feedburner – Any RSS feed, from a blog or podcast or photo site, is eligible for this free service (formerly a stand-alone, now owned and operated by Google). Running a feed through FeedBurner allows publishers of content to take advantage of a number of features, including subscriber statistics and publicity tools. *Humanities on Demand* uses SmartCast to optimize podcast and iTunes settings, SmartFeed to ensure maximum compatibility, and e-mail subscriptions to allow listeners to receive e-mail notification of new episodes. The most useful feature for the Council is a subscription page that allows potential subscribers to choose from a selection of common “podcatchers” or RSS aggregators, such as the Google Reader.

PodPress – One of a wide variety of developer-initiated plugins for the free blog platform WordPress, this service makes it easy to publish media files. As with the original page design for *Humanities on Demand*, options for each episode include listening to the MP3 file on the site using a Flash player or downloading the file. The major advantage is that PodPress automatically generates a feed, so there is no need to worry about maintaining the .xml file formerly updated by hand each time a new episode appeared.

Books and websites – *Podcasting for Dummies* by Tee Morris and Evo Terra provided a basic introduction to the technology behind podcasting, as well as tips for program planning and promotion. As of this writing, the book is out of print. Ginny Redish’s *Letting Go of the Words* is really about writing for the web, but the principles of simplicity and navigability presented in the book informed the redesign of the podcast site. Many websites were consulted in the course of the project. When Donna Jones was building the podcast’s original XML file, she relied heavily on the RSS specifications written for Harvard Law School by the Berkman Center on Internet

and Society (www.cyber.law.harvard.edu/rss), and checked the feed regularly at www.feedvalidator.org.

Next Steps

The future of *Humanities on Demand* depends largely on staff capacity. The project director worked on the podcast at 0.5FTE for the duration of the Start-Up grant; since the conclusion of the grant period, she has been able to devote only 5-8 hours per week to the project. One promising direction for the podcast is further integration into the regular programs of the Maine Humanities Council. As the program staff becomes more comfortable with the equipment and software, there will be greater potential for division of labor in which the work of recording and editing is shared, while the responsibility for organizing, packaging, and releasing episodes remains with a single project coordinator.

Most of the podcast content thus far has been limited, in format, to lectures or informal talks. (Exceptions include the theatrical productions and readings of children's books mentioned above, and a handful of interviews.) Since many of the Council's programs use a reading-and-discussion model, a long-term goal has been to record a group engaged in conversation around a particular book or idea. It's possible that this format, being more distinctive, would position *Humanities on Demand* favorably in comparison to other humanities podcasts originating from universities or think-tanks. The major hurdles to this format are getting everyone in a given group to agree to being recorded, and then keeping the presence of a microphone from inhibiting their discussion. The next step might be to gather a few willing scholars, such as the speakers at a teacher institute, for a trial run of the format.

Another category of content with untapped potential is place-based Maine literature, read aloud by an actor, politician, or other local/regional "celebrity." Works in the public domain would be particularly easy to record, without legal implications to consider. Essays or short stories by such authors as Sarah Orne Jewett, Henry David Thoreau, Ruth Moore, and Mary Ellen Chase are inextricably linked to Maine places, and might be promoted by the Chambers of Commerce or cultural tourism agencies in those places. Public schools teaching the required Maine curriculum would also benefit from having engaging audio versions of these texts available for reluctant readers.

Some of the partners that staff and advisory committee members have talked about, but not yet contacted, remain good prospects. The Maine Public Broadcasting Network, which maintains an online archive of lectures and presentations, is one potential partner.

With the start of a major renovation project, the Portland Public Library had to move its Brown Bag Lecture Series to a new venue. The Community Television Network, whose studio is located just down the street from the library, emerged as a logical choice because it could accommodate a studio audience while also reaching a television audience at home. This shift is the latest in a series of developments that have led Council staff to think about vodcasting, or at least adding a few video presentations to the existing podcast. As of this writing, staff members are researching and consulting with experts about a video camera purchase; as digital media continues to evolve, the Council will devise mission-aligned responses as resources permit.

Appendix A: Comprehensive List of Partners

Portland Public Library

McArthur Public Library, Biddeford

Blue Hill Library

City of Portland

CultureWorth

NAACP Portland Branch

Yarmouth Historical Society

Maine Festival of the Book

Museum of African Culture, Portland

Portland Freedom Trail

Maine Student Book Award

Portland Stage Company

Theatre at Monmouth

The Blaine House (Maine Governor's residence)

SALT Institute for Documentary Studies

Bowdoin College

University of Southern Maine:

- Stonecoast MFA Program
- American & New England Studies Program
- Schair Memorial Lecture Committee

Appendix B: Promotional Materials

HUMANITIES ON DEMAND

Have you ever missed a humanities event because you were away on business, or because it was snowing to beat the band, or because you live in Fort Kent and the event was in Portland? Perhaps you considered attending the Council's October symposium on *All the King's Men*, but it conflicted with the county fair you attend every fall.

There's no substitute for shaking hands with the audience member sitting next to you at an event, or getting an author to sign a book. Realistically, though, attending these events in person is not always convenient—or even feasible. That's why the Council has launched a podcast that makes it possible for humanities enthusiasts of all ages to experience the power and pleasure of ideas on demand.



If the mere mention of a podcast fills you with trepidation, you're not alone. Many people assume that podcasts are off-limits to anyone who hasn't purchased an iPod (the Apple device that has cornered the market on portable media players). The origins and legal status of the term "podcast" are clouded by debate, but you definitely do not need an iPod, or any other portable media player, to listen to a podcast. In fact, the vast majority of podcast fans report listening via their computers.

So here's how to turn any computer with an Internet connection into a radio that broadcasts humanities content, available whenever you want it:

1. Go to www.mainehumanities.org and click on the *Humanities on Demand* link.
2. Read through the list of recordings with descriptions. You can choose from a series of interviews of Maine writers; authors reading at our partner, the Portland Public Library; and selections from the archive of Council events. New content is being added all the time, but some of the speakers already represented are Richard Russo, Cathie Pelletier, and Huey P. Long (the inspiration behind *All the King's Men*).
3. Once you've found a recording that interests you, either click on the play button to listen to it right away, or download it to play later.
4. After listening, you may wish to respond by posting a comment or question to the *Humanities on Demand* blog. You'll find a link to the blog underneath the description of each recording.

If, on the other hand, you are comfortable with the technology, but simply don't care to spend any more time online than is absolutely necessary, consider these added enticements:

- composer Elliott Schwartz created and performed the short sound intros and "outros" that bracket the podcast recordings,
- recordings are forthcoming from institutions such as the Maine Historical Society and Portland Stage Company, and
- if you subscribe to the podcast using iTunes or a similar "podcatcher," the new recordings will come to you automatically as the podcast is updated.

Happy listening!

The podcast project is supported by a Digital Humanities Start-Up Grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.



Appendix C: Legal Release

FOR GOOD AND VALUABLE CONSIDERATION, the receipt whereof is hereby acknowledged, I do hereby irrevocably authorize the Maine Humanities Council, a Maine nonprofit corporation, to record, via photograph, video, audio or other method, my presentation on the _____ (date) and to use, reproduce, distribute, publish, perform, display and transmit such presentation and recording (collectively, the “Materials”), in whole or in part, in any form or media, whether now known or hereafter developed, including without limitation print media and Internet broadcast and display, at its sole discretion, without restriction as to changes or alterations. I understand that, based on space or other considerations, the Materials may be modified or edited before use, or may not be used.

I further authorize the Maine Humanities Council to use my name, likeness, biographical information, photograph and excerpts from the Materials as described above and for the purpose of promoting the Materials in any form or media, whether now known or hereafter developed.

I further represent and warrant that I am the author of any and all written materials that I read in the course of my presentation and that I either own the copyright thereto or have obtained from the owner of the copyright the right and authority to perform the work and grant the authorizations herein granted to the Maine Humanities Council.

I hereby release and agree to indemnify, defend and hold harmless the Maine Humanities Council from and against any and all damage, cost and liability (including attorneys’ fees) for claims arising from the Materials or the use, reproduction, distribution, performance, publication, display, transmission or broadcast of the Materials.

I have read and understand this document. I waive all rights to compensation for the use of the Material by the Maine Humanities Council and its licensees and assignees, and understand that Maine Humanities Council will have sole authority over use of the Materials.

SPEAKER: Name (please print): _____

Date: _____

Signature: _____

WITNESS: Name (please print): _____

Date: _____

Signature: _____