

Digi-babble: a quick guide

By **Bobbie Johnson**, Technology Correspondent, The Guardian

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Digital natives might throw them around like cyber confetti, but technology buzzwords are baffling if you're still adjusting to life in the 21st century.

Like any lingo, words on the web go in and out of fashion - so reeling off hoary old standards like information superhighway won't get you on to the cool kids table any more, if it ever did. Knowing the argot is essential when you are a part of the knowledge economy.

If you want to get ahead, make sure you can bandy fashionable terms about, and say them like you mean it...

Ajax

The definition of Ajax intertwines with that of Web2.0, a new technology that affectively acts as an intermediary between user and server, resulting in websites that operate like a software program.

Blogs

Formerly as weblog, these are online diaries or discussion forums, which you should all be getting used to by now. The past five years has seen an explosion in blogs and indeed the blogerati - those who produce blogs and therefore inhabit blogosphere.
<http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/news/>

Convergence

The fabled techno-rapture where everything merges into itself, and all your devices become one: TV over the internet, radio over the internet, and, heavens, even internet over the internet.

Folksonomy

Where users not only make and discuss content, but tag and categorise it for you too, making connections across the net.

Long Tail

All-encompassing term to capture the latest wave of activity on the net. Detailed definitions get very technical, very quickly; but the general idea is that websites become less like online magazines and more like software applications - something to use rather than read.

Mashup

Clever companies are letting the public remix their services, like merging Google Maps and Craigslist to show flats for rent on an A-Z.

Podcasts

Downloadable radio shows, which a casual use of Guardian Unlimited should illustrate nicely for you. The next step is likely to be video: fortunately vlog has yet to take off as a term.
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/podcasts>

RSS

There's some debate about what RSS stands for, but we can settle on really simple syndication - a content feed from site to user, which frees up the user from actually browsing sites and allows them to decide what is supplied to them, rather than searching for it.
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/newspoint>

User-generated content

This is the stuff that is really getting the web watchers hot under the hard drive these days. It gives users the tools to produce text, photos and video off their own backs. Wikipedia gives you the general idea.

Web 2.0

It might seem like small beer, but all the niche activity you see on the web means firms don't even have to sell big products these days - the "long-tail" will carry them through. This is the understanding that niche services can now make money because the net offers access to such vast markets.

If only we'd called it GuerillaMedia

Neil McIntosh tracks the arrival of podcasting and reveals who's to blame for this ridiculous word



It's early 2004, and journalist Ben Hammersley is speculating - in the pages of the Guardian's Online section - on the impact of the then relatively new iPod music player on traditional broadcasting. "All the ingredients," he writes, "are there for a new boom in amateur radio."

"But what to call it? Audioblogging? Podcasting? GuerillaMedia?"

As it turns out, it was the middle option that stuck. This was the first recorded mention of the word "podcasting", and its subsequent rise was so rapid that - by the end of the following year - it had been named "word of the year" by the Oxford English Dictionary.

We may come to loath these trendy technological terms, but this time round the blame can be placed at the Guardian's door.

REVOLUTION

Audio on the internet has been around for years. What has made podcasting significant is that it delivers that audio direct to someone's music player, rather than forcing them to be tethered to their computers. That change, combined with the huge success of the Apple iPod, has brought about a minor revolution that - some enthusiasts say - might change radio for the better.

Technically, the term podcasting refers to a method by which an audio producer - the Guardian, the BBC, or an individual in their spare room - creates an audio recording, encodes it on their computer (saving it as an MP3) and then delivers it to a dedicated piece of software on your computer. This piece of software then loads it on to your portable music player next time you plug the thing in.

Most typically, this means you pick a radio programme, usually through the iTunes music store, which makes it easy to "subscribe" to your favourite shows. Then, each time a new episode comes out, your PC or Mac automatically downloads it. Next time you plug in your iPod, the computer sends that programme to your iPod.

So far, so mundane. But the impact of this apparently simple system is quite far reaching. Computers have long made it possible to create and edit quite a decent sounding piece of radio, provided you use a decent microphone in a reasonably quiet environment. What podcasting adds is the ability to distribute this cheaply generated audio.

You don't need a radio license to podcast. Nor do you need to run an expensive online radio station. Podcasting democratizes "radio" a bit like weblogging democratized online publishing by making the means of publishing to a potentially huge audience very cheap indeed.

"THE PODFATHER"

An early pioneer of podcasting - indeed, he's nicknamed "the Podfather" by his fans - is former MTV presenter Adam Curry. Working most days from his house in Guildford (he also has a "Curry condo" in the US), he records a show, on a fraction of the budget of traditional radio, which is downloaded by thousands of fans around the world. He promotes unsigned bands, rails against the tyranny of music labels who refuse to let their music appear on podcasts, and talks incessantly - if quite entertainingly, in a blokey sort of way - about the details of his unordinary life; his new top end car, his coffee machine, his legal battle with a Netherlands-based magazine publisher.

Elsewhere on the net, you'll find a range of podcasts that's just as eclectic as Curry's show. Hunt

ECLECTIC

for podcasts on the iTunes music store by downloading the iTunes software for your Mac or PC and clicking on the "podcasts" link on the front page of the music store. A world of free audio - of massively varying quality - unfolds (and all the faster if you have broadband, which is practically a must if you are to get by in the podcast listening world).

The BBC has a huge presence on iTunes, transferring dozens of its most popular shows to podcast format, and even editing together special podcast only versions of its output, from Women's Hour to the "best" of its Radio 1 breakfast DJ, Chris Moyles. On the latter the music has been ripped out, because record companies are wary of allowing their music to be used in podcasts, so far. The Daily Telegraph, meanwhile, became the first British newspaper to run daily news podcasts.

There's also plenty from smaller operations, and even enthusiasts in their spare rooms, talking about everything from cars to computers. You can even learn a language. And, this being the internet, there's also plenty about sex - one of the most popular "news" podcasts is the Kitkast - "sex news and sexy interviews from Ms. Kitka".

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What will be, will be hi-tech

It might not involve flying jetpacks to work or going to Mars on holiday, but you can bet technology is going to drive our future, says **Bobbie Johnson**

Technologists, like most of us, love to be right. And, over the past 30 years, they've had good reason to feel smug. Admittedly, we're still driving cars rather than flying to work every day, and few of us have visited the moon. But still, trend predictors have got more right than they have got wrong.

Technology has become a vital cog in the way our world works. Its influence has grown quickly, we have co-opted its language into our everyday speech and its rhythms now run our lives. The unstoppable rise of the personal computer has undoubtedly produced a remarkable change in society and the way we work.

That trickle-down effect is still in action, and the impact of the internet and other communication and information technologies continues to ripple throughout society.

The next decade will undoubtedly see further shifts, though it is uncertain whether change will continue on the rocketing path of recent years or not.

One thing is for sure, though: we will continue to become more connected. The massive growth in mobile phones, and the speed of their development, look set to continue. Many handsets are already small, powerful computers, and they will continue to accrue functions and abilities as time passes. Within a couple of years, we will all be able to use any mobile to check our email, track our location, and surf the internet.

Phones will also create links back to our computers at home or in the office, and to our other : we will use them to pay for our shopping, prove our identity, or to travel on the tube. And we will also connect them to new displays, like pull-out electronic paper screens. These thin plastic sheets could potentially

roll out from the body of a mobile phone, creating a scroll-style screen that updates wirelessly with new information - the results could change the way we read books, view newspapers or even watch TV.

And the changes that will take place in your pocket are also likely to spread into your home. The television set is already about to get a facelift, with crystal clear high definition TV soon to arrive in the UK. But its benefits could spread beyond better picture quality, since the increased screen resolution makes it much easier to reproduce computer screen displays on TV sets. This finally makes it viable for hi-tech interfaces to adopt the sit-back experience of television.

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