

Ask a Biologist Vol 010 (Guest Peggy Coulombe)

Casting a Podcast Line -

Podcasting is new to both Ask-a-Biologist and also an exciting new science program called Science Studio. The host of this new show, Peggy Coulombe, talks with Dr. Biology about what it has been like to start podcasting.

Transcript

Dr. Biology: This is 'Ask-a-Biologist', a program about the living world, and I am Dr. Biology. As you might be able to tell from the sound in the background, we're recording live at the MEC Conference or Microcomputers in Education Conference.

My guest is Peggy Coulombe, the host of the 'Science Studio' show at Arizona State University. Welcome, Peggy.

Peggy Coulombe: Hey, Doc.

Dr. Biology: Both Peggy and I began podcasting just a few months ago, and I thought maybe it might help to talk about some of the things we've learned and what we're experiencing as we've started out. We're hoping that this might help some other people.

So I was going to jump right in and discuss a question with Peggy, but I thought one of the things that might be missing is knowing exactly what a podcast is and what it isn't.

Just to let people know, just because you record something to an MP3 file and you put it up on the Web, doesn't mean that you are going to actually be doing a podcast. You actually need to have a collection of content, and in this case you might distribute it through something like iTunes.

I have Barnaby coming over and checking up on my microphone. This is kind of fun when you're doing it live.

Anyway, the idea is that you're going to be putting up content in a regular manner, so if you don't have a constant flow of content, you're not necessarily doing a podcast. You can still do a recording, but you're not necessarily doing a podcast.

With that said, for our first question, Peggy, let's start with creating podcasts. When you began podcasting, what was the hardest part?

Peggy: The hardest part, I think, was just getting used to the concept of talking into a microphone and thinking about what I'm going to say in a different way, since I'm used to writing on paper and computers. The way you express yourself verbally can be completely different than the way you might write out something.

Dr. Biology: I guess one of the things I found very difficult, wasn't necessarily the recording, it was listening to my voice. I love your voice, but like most people, when you hear your own, sometimes you have a tendency to not like that voice. I'm getting used to it, and I think it works well, if you're stuck with it you've got to go with it.

What do you like most about podcasting?

Peggy: I think the most interesting thing about podcasting, besides learning the technology and learning something new, has been the time I have been able to sit and talk with researchers, and sort of get to know them as personalities, and find out what path took them to this kind of science they're doing, as well as what fuels their enthusiasm for the kind of work they're doing. I think being with people like that, who are creative, generates a kind of positive energy in my own life.

Dr. Biology: I'd agree, and I think that's the other part, is that you get this, the enthusiasm; you get to listen to their voice, which is good.

I want to mention again, I said at the beginning it's 'Science Studio'. If you want to listen to some of Peggy's podcasts, you'd want to go to the SOLS site, which is SOLS.asu.edu, and then underneath that, if you do a slash and you put "podcast", you'll get directly to her show that she's been doing. There are already eight episodes up, and there will soon be nine.

Are there things you don't like about podcasting?

Peggy: I don't think there's anything I don't like about podcasting. I think it has been an evolving process in learning to do things better, more than anything else.

We stepped very blindly into this, if I remember correctly, and not necessarily knowing a lot about the technical aspects about it. It's not as simple as picking up a recording device and talking. It's learning how to position the microphone, and how to do the editing, and how to make it an interesting product, something that people really want to listen to.

Dr. Biology: We'll talk a little bit more about that. It really is interesting being live. I love these sounds that are in the background.

Have you changed the way you prepare for podcasting now?

Peggy: Absolutely. Initially, I wasn't really quite sure how to put a script together. I wasn't really even sure the kind of questions I would ask.

I was so used to sitting down and speaking with professors with a tape recorder, and doing interviews in that way, that the thought of having a microphone sitting in front of me, it kind of inhibited my desire to speak.

And let's face it; I really don't play much of a role when I'm doing an interview for something that I write, and so it put me in a completely different place.

In terms of preparation? Yeah. Now I write things out, I speak it aloud in my office. I'm sure people walk by and watch me waving my arms, and wonder what I'm doing, but it's that I'm trying to hear how it will come out, how the final product will come out, and that has definitely evolved over time.

Dr. Biology: I'd have to say that's true for me as well. I really had to work on the fact that you don't want to be reading something; it's that natural speech that you're working on. I started off doing a script, and I still do it--in front of me right now I have this script with columns, and it has some basic questions that I want to ask you.

It doesn't mean that I follow it exactly--it depends on how the discussion goes; and I also highlight the questions with yellow, versus some of the background information I might want to use. That has worked, certainly, well. Not everybody does it the same way.

Peggy: No, I mean, my scripts are just kind of line items more than anything else.

Dr. Biology: Do you find yourself speaking differently when you do podcasts.

Peggy: There's no question that I speak differently. I think everybody has a lot of inflection in their voices – voices, or voice? In your case it's voices, we'll get to that later.

But in my case, I think it's almost like you do a little bit of acting, because you need to have inflection, you need to bring across your point in ways that--you know, if you're on TV you've got plenty of body language, but if you're on radio or podcasting it has to come in the tone of your voice, how soft it is, how loud it is, and all aspects of it come out tonally in that way. So absolutely, I have a different voice.

Dr. Biology: I've noticed that the very first podcast, I was really afraid of letting loose, so to speak. I didn't want to sound silly, but I wanted to have some kind of a continuity going on.

As we've gone on I've become much more relaxed, as you talked about, and I think the biggest thing is allowing yourself to pause. We have a tendency, when we are doing things on a microphone, that we feel like we have to fill all the space, all the air, and that's not natural.

Peggy: Yes, I think that one other thing is I had to learn to be quiet when someone else was talking. Because I was used to, you know, in a usual conversation you kind of pop in there and you go, "Yeah, yeah! I felt that same way." But you can't do that when you're doing a podcast because you overrun what someone else is saying.

Dr. Biology: Right, and if you overrun them, we can't edit very easily. So if you talk, you, Peggy...

[both speaking]

Peggy: You want me to talk now...

Dr. Biology: If we're talking at the same time...

Peggy: It's really a problem, yeah.

Dr. Biology: If we wanted to edit that last little bit, there's no way. You have to work with this little dance when you're doing these interviews.

What do you think is the future of podcasting?

Peggy: Gosh, you know, I don't know. There are so many technologies that come and go, I can't even begin to guess what niche podcasting will fill, and how long it will stay, and what its future will be.

I think that the thing that makes it most interesting, like a lot of the changes in journalism today, is that it's putting sort of the power into the hands of the people. Anybody can podcast, anybody can put it up. You can talk about anything, for the most part. That might give it some staying power in that regard.

Dr. Biology: I do know that I read somewhere that after about three months, 90 percent of all podcasts cease and desist. We're not going to do that with 'Ask-A-Biologist', and we're not going to do that with 'Science Studio'. It's that sustainability that you want to be able to do. That makes it exciting, also, because someone, again, can subscribe to 'Science Studio', for example, on their iTunes, with their iPod.

They don't have to go check and see when Peggy has done her latest show. Even though there are two each month, they're not always at exactly the same time. It downloads it automatically, and if you're out on the road, which I think is great. You could be exercising, you could be biking, you could be traveling up into the mountains, and you could be listening to Peggy.

Peggy: Hah, well maybe. I think one other thing that makes podcasting unique, and maybe both radio and podcast unique, is that it gives a voice to authors, artists, and researchers. For me at least, it changes how I perceive the work that they do, how I feel about them. Even though I don't know them, I get a sense of who they are from the way they use their voice. For example, if you had Robert Frost reading his "Road Less Traveled" – or "Road Not Taken", excuse me. Then it takes on a completely different...

Dr. Biology: Persona, almost.

Peggy: Persona. It comes alive in a way that it can't possibly come alive with me reading it. It takes on a sort of richness and a texture, and expression and personality, that uniquely reflects Robert Frost, and that I could never possibly capture. And I think in that way, radio and podcasting have something to offer that's going to stay well beyond any other kind of medium.

Dr. Biology: Yeah, I think that's going to be something that, again, as you mentioned earlier, we'll see if it stays. We'll see how well it holds up.

As a tool, I've always wondered, when you talk about education, what do you think podcasting has to offer to the educational realm, and what I would call general knowledge shows?

Peggy: I guess the thing, again, I would point to, is that aspect of giving a voice to the researcher or the artist. That personality, that creative mind comes through in the way that they use their language, where they make their pauses, where they make their emphasis.

And I think that's valuable historically, I think it's valuable as an education tool. It gives you, I think, a window of insight into how someone has constructed a creative world beyond what's on a written page.

Dr. Biology: Right. I also need to mention that Peggy has had some really interesting guests. We've had a skydiver; we have a painter, and quite a few other background hobbies or interests that you don't usually attribute to scientists. I think that's equally important with these shows, is that you do get a feeling about this person, and that it is a person.

Peggy: They take on a three-dimensional aspect, yeah, as opposed to it all being about that one piece of their work. Often when you read an article, for example, about somebody, it is only about some small window, some very tiny aspect of who they are. In fact, who they are might not even play a role in it; it may just be what they're doing.

And I think podcasting, because you are talking to someone, you talk about topics that normally wouldn't get covered in written media.

Dr. Biology: Right. I also think it helps in the educational realm because some people learn very well by reading, and others learn a little bit better, they're audio learners, they pick up a lot of their information through just listening, and so it's nice to have that other vehicle easily accessible, easily made, actually. You can produce a podcast on, truly, a shoestring.

We've been talking about what it has been like for the two of us to get started. Do you have some advice for someone starting out, because it's really fresh for us?

Peggy: [Laughs] Advice... I don't know if I'm in a position to give advice right now. I think I'm still very much a student of the media myself, but I think the things that have helped are going and listening to other sites. Seeing what other people are doing, what tricks they employ, what other sounds they might bring in, like the ambience behind us, the things that they do with their voice and the way they talk to their subject that gives them some insight on how to improve their own product. And of course taking a class--we've been taking a class with Pauline Davies, who is in the Hugh Downs School of Communication...

Dr. Biology: Human Communication.

Peggy: ... Human Communication, at ASU. She has really opened up a whole world--because she is a BBC broadcaster--a whole world of how people do this professionally.

Dr. Biology: I was fortunate enough to actually have Pauline and another well known broadcaster from ABC, which is the Australian Broadcasting System. His name is Robyn Williams--not to be confused with the comedian. Actually, his name is R-O-B-Y-N, easy for me to say, right?

Which brings us to another area here, the concept of editing. When you're not doing something live, like we are, some of these things you can actually cut out that we might leave in and that we might not. So if this sounds really clean later, it means I was able to edit it quite well, and if not it means the ambiance was making it more difficult. What have you learned about the editing?

Peggy: Well thank goodness for editing, that's what I've learned about editing. Things like saying, "Umm," You are never as aware of all your little verbal ticks as when you listen to a recording of yourself.

Some people go for the "ummm." Another favorite, I believe, was "so". "So, I hear..." Yeah, we did that one a lot. I think it makes you more aware of how you speak and how you are perceived, and I can't really say much more about editing than, yeah, it helps you understand what you're trying to do with your medium better by doing it.

Dr. Biology: Right and we've found that, we were actually using some free software for this called Audacity, that's actually what we're recording today with. It's free; you can get it on the Web. But there are quite a few other packages out there as well that make it really easy to fix some of those tics, as you mentioned, that may become a little more annoying.

I usually ask three questions of the scientists that I have on this show, and in your past life you were a scientist.

Peggy: Yup.

Dr. Biology: OK. But you've actually, your life now has shifted gears and you are now more of a writer, maybe you always were a writer. But when did you first know that you wanted to be a writer.

Peggy: The truth is that I was interested in both science and writing since I was a kid, and at some point I had to make a choice, and it never occurred to me to go into anything other than science. I think part of that is because, at the time, when I was growing up, the options for women were somewhat limited. I didn't want to be a teacher, and so it never occurred to me to be a novelist.

My dad was a very practical guy, he was an industrial chemist, and he said, "Choose something you can make money at, that you love." So science was my second love, in some respects, and the one that puzzled me more, it wasn't as easy for me, let me put it

that way. So that's the one I chose.

I wrote plays when I was five, six, seven. I mean, it has always been an aspect of my life, but I didn't turn it into a career until recently.

Dr. Biology: The other thing I always am curious about with my scientists, I say, you no longer could be a biologist or a scientist and you had to pick some other career. Well, I'd have to take two away from you. I'd take your writing away from you, and I'd have to take your science away from you. If you couldn't do those two, what would you do?

Peggy: Wow. I think, honestly, I would have tried to be a professional athlete if I had had a third option. Yeah, pretty much.

Dr. Biology: An athlete. You actually have a hobby that's in that realm.

Peggy: Yeah, I compete in outrigger canoe; but when I was younger I was a runner, and that probably would have been what I would have pursued.

Dr. Biology: Can you tell us just a little bit about outrigger canoe?

Peggy: Outrigger canoe... picture the South Seas, and flowing water, and crashing waves, and six people in a boat about 40 feet long, who are flailing madly, trying to make their way over the surf out into the open ocean, and that's kind of it.

Dr. Biology: And you actually started this in an unusual place, Washington, D.C.

Peggy: I did start it in Washington, D.C., and yeah, it was a pretty strange place to be starting something like outrigger canoe, which is a sport that comes out of the cultural traditions of Hawaii and Polynesia.

But it had been in the United States, on the West Coast, Continental United States, since about 1950, and at some point some crazy person said, "Hey let's take it East." So they went east, and Washington, D.C. was one of the first places where there was an outrigger canoe club, particularly for women, and we were one of the first pioneers, so to speak, in the 1990s.

Dr. Biology: Marvelous. Well this has been fun, recording at the MEC conference. It has added to our list of things we're learning as we're doing podcasting. We certainly have had to venture out from our very comfortable studio. We do have our trusted sound engineer, Jason.

Peggy: Woohoo!

Dr. Biology: Yeah, Jason's over there working with us, so we feel real comfortable there; but we also have about several hundred other people milling around, so this is definitely a different atmosphere for us. With that said, I want to thank my guest, Peggy Coulombe, for visiting with us today.

Peggy: Thanks. I'll see you in about five minutes.

Dr. Biology: Signing off from this show is kind of easy in the studio, but here it's a little different. You have been listening to 'Ask-A-Biologist' and my guest has been Peggy Coulombe, the host of the 'Science Studio' show that is broadcast from the School of Life Sciences at Arizona State University.

The 'Ask-A-Biologist' podcast is produced on the campus of Arizona State University, and even though our program is usually not broadcast live, you can still send us your questions about biology with our companion web site. The address is AskABiologist.asu.edu, or you can just Google the words "Ask A Biologist."

I'm Dr. Biology.