



Teens in a podcast: Guys who banter online connect with fellow high school students

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Bob Donaldson, Post-Gazette

Lucian Wintrich, left, and Marc Werner, with one of his frequent yawns, bill "Acorns & Merlot" as a podcast for the "adolescent aristocrat."

By Adrian McCoy, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Listening to the weekly podcast "Acorns & Merlot" is like overhearing a phone conversation between a couple of high school kids -- sometimes rambling or illuminating, sometimes irreverent or crude ... and often hilarious. In this case, the conversation takes place between two articulate and opinionated high school seniors who have been entertaining their peers, locally and now globally.

Hosts Lucian Baxter Wintrich IV of Squirrel Hill and Marc Werner of Shadyside focus on their everyday experiences, commenting and reacting spontaneously in an ongoing and uncensored dialogue.

Billed as a podcast for the "adolescent aristocrat," "Acorns & Merlot" is the creation of 18-year-old Wintrich. It started in the fall of 2005 with an experience he had at a homecoming dance in his junior year at Allderdice High School. The girl who



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invited him "more or less ignored me for the rest of the dance," Wintrich recalls. "I was kind of disheartened, [but] I thought it was a funny story, so I wanted to share it with whoever felt like listening. That was the first episode.

"Then another conflict would arise that I thought would be really good content. So I'd start taping again."

Wintrich and Werner met through a mutual friend, and Werner joined the podcasts a few months later. Other guest hosts and friends sit in occasionally. Originally, episodes were posted whenever a good story came up, but now "Acorns & Merlot" sticks to a semi-regular weekly schedule. It's a major time commitment -- both for the hosts and the listeners. Each episode weighs in at between 60 to 90 minutes.

The site is finding an audience -- a large one by many podcast standards. It has a following among local high school students but also has listeners scattered across the United States and internationally, especially in England. Some callers have British accents. One caller did a Borat impression, reading an ode in praise of the podcast.

The show was downloaded more than 8,800 times in a recent 30-day period, according to the podcast distribution service Libsyn's statistics; Wintrich says the show was drawing between 4,500 to 5,000 listeners per episode around the Christmas holidays, although the number has dropped off since.

"Acorns & Merlot" is now being done as a live podcast -- an Internet radio show where listeners call in while it's recording and take part in a live online chat room through the Web site. The site also has a forum where listeners can post messages.

The podcasts draw from the perspectives and personalities of Wintrich and Werner. Although there's no self-censorship, it's not just another Howard Stern-style shock jock imitation. Still, language and content earned it an "explicit" rating on iTunes, meaning that if parental controls are in place on the iTunes account, the podcast can't be downloaded by underage listeners

Lucian Wintrich, top, co-hosts the live podcast "Acorns & Merlot" from his bedroom in Squirrel Hill with Marc Werner, below.



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New technology minimizes privacy

New media -- podcasts, videocasts and social networking sites -- are growing so fast that they have in some ways outpaced people's ability to understand the impact on their lives.

Alessandro Acquisti is an assistant professor of information technology and public policy at Carnegie Mellon University's John Heinz III School of Public Policy and Management. He studies privacy issues and the tradeoffs people make when deciding what kinds of information they want to make public about themselves -- whether it's risking identity theft by using credit cards or having a grocery chain track their purchases because they use retail discount cards, or whether they reveal personal information about themselves when they join social networking sites such as MySpace or Facebook.

"The way technology is tilting the balance toward revelation rather than protection, it's so easy to reveal and it's become so difficult to protect [one's privacy]," he says.

Talking and gossiping about one's peers are an integral part of high school culture, and the Internet has taken that tale-spinning to a global stage.

Younger people tend to be less privacy-conscious than prior generations, Acquisti says. "This new generation has absolutely embraced this technology. This generation grew up with mobile phones and the Internet. They have a different perspective on information revelation than older generations."

and age listeners.

-- Adrian McCoy

Why acorns? Why merlot?

The show's name comes from, well, here's what the home page has to say: "A little bit of nature, a little bit of wine. Welcome to the Acorns & Merlot podcast, where we tackle the issues of most 'non-gangsta' students and broadcast to you weekly from good old Pennsylvania. Acorns and Merlot: a student view-related podcast with a bit of music, humor and wine (even though we are under the drinking age), where we tackle the issues from politics to fashion to our own tales of life."

On the Internet

There are several ways to hear the podcasts: from the Web site, www.acornsandmerlot.com, iTunes and several podcast sites. Current and back episodes are archived on A&M and iTunes.

Tim Dobish of Squirrel Hill is a junior at Allderdice and a regular listener. He found out about the podcast through people talking about it in class. "It's interesting because they're my age. They discuss things I understand and sometimes people that I know."

Not all of the frequent listeners go to school here. Claire Arbour, a high school junior from Cadillac, Mich., doesn't listen regularly to a lot of podcasts or videocasts, but she is a regular A&M listener. "I love how it's classy and how I can relate to the stuff that happens to the hosts," she says. She thinks it's in tune with what a lot of other high-school-age people are thinking and talking about.

"I can relate to the stuff they talk about. Just the typical, well, sometimes not so typical, teenage high school situations. I like how they delve into fashion occasionally, as well as relationships."

While many high school students now use podcasts as learning tools or as news media or in conjunction with school activities, "Acorns & Merlot" -- with its combination of talk, improv and cathartic confession -- has more in common with podcasting students who focus on comedy and chatter. A Web search reveals at least a handful of student podcasts, including "The Nick and Jayne Show," hosted by two rural New Zealand teens; "School The Truth," a podcast and blog from Los Angeles; "The Electric Pony Show" from Oklahoma; and "The Penguin Posse" from Salt Lake City, Utah.

The Pittsburgh hosts have a lot to say about school and pop culture, speaking directly to middle school and high school listeners in a way mainstream media don't.

Range of topics

No subject is off limits, from last weekend's party to global events. Parents who listen along with their kids might be appalled to hear a candid discussion about sex, or equally surprised to hear the pair talk about how much they enjoyed a Sunday morning visit to a church. Topics are unpredictable, from what happened in school or at the mall or the dinner table, to girls and music. All this is mixed with snippets culled from newscasts and comedians' routines.

After actor Michael Richards' comedy-club incident, for example, the hosts analyzed the issue at length, playing audio clips of Richards' meltdown and adding their own running

commentary on racism, language and society.

Everything unfolds in real time, without editing, from a room in Wintrich's home. Listeners will hear phones ringing and answering-machine recordings while the hosts make phone calls.

The elements of improv and spontaneity are important. Both hosts come up with a sheet of topics they want to discuss. Neither sees the other's topics until show time. And the podcasts air unedited after recording. "Everything's spontaneous," Werner says.

That lack of self-censorship has caused problems. Several episodes were removed from archives because of references to people and situations that generated complaints, including from family members.

It's not business; it's personal

Both hosts compare the podcast to a conversation with a therapist. "We try to make it as personalized as possible. To a degree, what we're sharing in the show is what I might be talking to a therapist about. I really don't hold too much back," Wintrich says.

"I'm not into blogging or new media," Werner adds. "I'm not really in the format because I like the format, [but] because I like the content of the show."

They admit they exaggerate in their storytelling at times for comic impact.

Both are in the middle of the college application process. Werner plans to major in political science and history. Wintrich, who plans to major in business, also designed the "Acorns & Merlot" Web site.

Both hosts will be graduating from high school at the end of the year, but "Acorns & Merlot" will go on. They have discussed handing it down to the next generation of high school students, but listeners urged them to continue, Wintrich says. He plans to take it with him to college.

The "Acorns & Merlot" graduation to college will leave an opening on the virtual soapbox for local high-schoolers.

Maybe a new generation is getting ready to launch version 2.0.

(Adrian McCoy can be reached at amccoy@post-gazette.com.)

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