

Hi this is Steve Nerlich from Cheap Astronomy (www.cheapastro.com) and this is *Astronomy 2.0*.

The term Web 2.0 loosely describes a whole swag of internet-based interactive and community building activities – for which the podcast has achieved a puzzlingly iconic status. I say puzzling, since it is really just a broadcast medium and the only real interactivity is for me the podcaster. But increasingly, podcasts are just the front end of a whole buzzing community you might be drawn into – if you like the podcast.

Now Cheap Astronomy isn't a particularly good example, since if you do get drawn into our clutches, all you find is a fairly 1.0 website with a few pages and hyperlinks and more podcasts – with about the only interactive component being an email address. And hey, we will get back to if you use it – and even post your input on our clunky old readers' contribution page if you like. But yeah, that's about it.

A better example might be where your wife tells you 'hey, you like space stuff – you should listen to this' and it turns out to be an Astronomy Cast episode and when you like it, you decide to log into their site and find a whole series of episodes. So, you download them all and start from Episode 1. And after immersing yourself in all that content, you finally reach the present day and start hanging out for next week's podcast and suddenly realise you're a drooling fan.

Listening to Astronomy Cast introduced me to Phil Plait – and I've read both books – and the *Skeptics Guide to the Universe*, a podcast that gives you a strange feeling of intimacy when you find out that Perry died and then Rebecca got married – and that was after Jay had already married the voice-over girl. And it's a science show.

Cruising some of the associated websites I kept hearing about, introduced me to the Bad Astronomy-Universe Today discussion forum – with its fabulous Questions and Answers section. Here you can ask pretty much anything in the way of astronomy, astrophysics or space travel and get five or ten responses – maybe even twenty if it's about black holes or relativity.

Some responses are just from well meaning folks with vague suggestions, but generally someone comes in with an answer that's right on the money, often with a link to more information – and usually within 24 hours. Alternatively, you can join a queue of questions to be read out on one of the big name podcasts – not that there's anything wrong with that. But if you have some burning question you need answered, like now, today – just google BAUT Forum. It really is good.

Speaking of Universe Today, there's the fabulous Carnival of Space which first led me to become obsessed about web stats. See not long after the Cheap Astronomy website went live, in September 2008, I was all excited about getting 25 unique visitors – and then I started cruising web forums and saying hey, got a website over here and the numbers started climbing – and then I emailed Fraser Cain, you know Fraser Cain, and then there I was hosting Carnival of Space in January 2009 and I got 631 visitors in that month. Woah.

And I am constantly surprised by this generous spirited interest, because in all important respects Cheap Astronomy is a very cheap website – where it takes me fifteen minutes to position a graphic just right – even though it isn't – and it has none of the blog functionality or automatic feed generation that them there young folks of today seem to enjoy. But a website it was – and with a bit of bodgy code and some serious keyboard hammering – I published my first ever podcast in February 2009, a 365 days podcast at that.

Of course 2009 was all about podcasts to the people for the 365 days of the International Year of Astronomy. Apparently I suddenly had hundreds of people listening to my podcast – and a few of them trickled over to take a look at my website. February 2009 stats, over 900 unique visitors – baby. It was about then that my esteemed American colleague Vernon started sending me his weekly what's up in the night sky reports – which I have posted on the website ever since.

Come March, Fraser Cain was looking for another Carnival of Space host. Me, meeee. March 2009 stats, 2,239 unique visitors – and yet another 365 days podcast in the bag. Cheap Astronomy had entered the building.

So, if you ever want to do a 10 minute weekly podcast – here's a tip. Interview someone. Writing a ten minute script about something you know something about takes about 2 days – writing a script about something you don't know that much about – 4 days. If you interview someone, all you have to do is have a chat and then manage the audio production and publication.

Of course, the best thing about 365 days podcasts is that you don't need a website to publish – they do all that for you – even putting your little beloved podcast out on an RSS feed. It was about April or May 2009 when this particularly penny dropped for me. I had just built my fabulous website out of plywood and duct tape, started publishing my scratchy hand-cranked podcasts – and suddenly everyone's talking about feeds.

But remember Web 2.0 is all about community. Because of the whole 365 days thing, I've – at least virtually – got to know Nancy Atkinson who manages a lot of the day to day 365 days podcast process. So a quick email – hey Nancy I know you're really busy, but *what's a feed?*

So Nancy puts me on to Rob Simpson from Orbiting Frog – who I actually already knew – at least virtually – from doing Carnival of Space. And Rob talks me through how you can just start a blog now and it generates a feed automatically – and I have to explain I have this old plywood website, so he puts me onto a site where you can kind of generate a feed and then edit it in a text reader – and after some more vigorous keyboard hammering, I finally had myself an RSS feed.

Hey, I'm even on iTunes now – which only took another weekend and more emails – and I still can't get the album graphic to work, but nonetheless by July 2009 I had 6 feed subscribers.

From there, just imagine one those sepia tinted film sequences of my monthly rise in podcasting glory up to December 2009 when I chalked up 50 podcasts – including twelve

365 day podcasts – the last one with special guest star Dr Pamela Gay. And by then there were over 60 subscribers to my feed – 60! Dude!

So yeah, I know Skeptics Guide has 60,000 – and I'm often on the verge of packing it in, particularly when it comes to trying think up some cheesy new way of saying www.cheapastro.com at the start of these things. I mean, you think it's hard listening to...

But really, it's not so bad just plodding along at my own pace, I do get to meet a lot of fabulous people – at least virtually – here in the back blocks of the fringes of podcast world. And back in the real world, down at the office, no-one's ever heard of the Skeptics Guide but nearly everyone knows who I am. It all kind of makes sense somehow.

Thanks for (oh, did I mention I did a podcast with Dr Pamela Gay? Oh yeah, I did) listening. This is Steve Nerlich from Cheap Astronomy, www.cheapastro.com. Cheap Astronomy offers an educational website where you can have your own private international year of astronomy. No ads, no profit, just good science. Bye.