



Transcription Goes Digital: A Dialog Between Researcher and Transcriptionist

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David: When faced with the prospect of writing that big report on a bunch of focus groups or IDIs, nothing makes me feel more secure than a good set of typed transcripts. The customary practice of mailing, or even FedEx-ing, tapes to a transcription service starts to feel slow in this age of “instant everything,” which recently got me to wondering about digital possibilities.

Tech maven that I am, I was curious to see what kind of job my new 30-gigabyte iPod would do recording a recent set of focus groups I was conducting. I snapped a \$40 Griffin iTalk microphone (www.griffintechnology.com) onto the top of the iPod and just set it on the conference table during that evening’s two groups. Others had told me that, while the iPod can record audio, it does not do so at as high a quality as dedicated digital audio recorders from companies such as Olympus and Sony. Still, I was curious to see if the iPod could produce something useable, given this very primitive set-up with a single, inexpensive microphone.

At the end of the groups, I was delighted to discover that I could hear each of the respondents on playback, though not as loudly as I would have liked. I feel certain that multiple microphones would solve that problem.

Of course, I still had the regular cassette tapes provided by the facility, but I was on a tight timeline to turn around the report. Mailing, even FedEx-ing, those tapes for transcription would put me behind the eight ball. That got me to wondering whether there might be any transcription hardware or software out there dedicated to handling digital files. I also wondered if any of the transcription services might have a digital capability. Wouldn’t it be great if I could

just zap them the recording electronically and they could very quickly e-mail me back the transcript?

Doing a Google search, I quickly discovered lots of choices out there in terms of hardware and software solutions for digital transcription. And, as synchronicity would have it, just at that time I received a call from Howard Jackson, inquiring if I had any transcription needs! I asked him if he has a digital transcription capability. It turns out he had been doing this and is quite knowledgeable on the topic. Take it away, Howard!

Howard: Yes, David, while a large portion of our business continues to support the requirements of moderators and facilities utilizing analog cassettes, we have structured our services to additionally support those operating in the digital domain.

Simply put, recordings made with digital voice recorders (DVRs) allow quick computer download and electronic transfer of the recording to your transcription company, providing an immediate timesaving and cost-cutting solution and quicker presentation to your client. DVRs are inexpensive, effective and, best of all, easy to use. Normally outfitted with built-in condenser microphones, these hand-held devices produce sound quality superior to analog recorders, allowing your transcriptionist to produce an accurate, verbatim record for presentation.

Compatibility is always a question, and companies like Olympus and Sony have done a great job in manufacturing DVRs with software programs that talk to Microsoft Windows and Apple Macintosh computers without problem. Olympus DVRs include software that allows playback of their proprietary digital .dss files and also .wav, .mp3 and .wma files. Sony devices produce Sony Memory Stick files and also include a player to accommodate these and other digital files. Most DVRs provide extended hours of recording time and are available in good, better and best models, with standard to advanced features, such as additional inputs to support your multiple-microphone requirement, David.

For the researcher, DVRs remove the cost of blank cassettes (and shipment thereof); they create the ability to edit and archive recorded focus groups and interview files; and they create the ability to email, upload or download to an FTP site or burn these files to a CD. Digital voice recorders provide the solution for working more efficiently and at less cost.

David: In my own internet explorations, Howard, I turned up some interesting finds. As a die-hard Mac fan, I was intrigued to discover a \$20 program called Transcriva (from Bartas Technologies at www.bartastechnologies.com). It doesn't do the typing for you, but it does support a variety of audio formats. Unlike transcription machines that use a foot pedal to start/stop/repeat/advance, these functions are handled through the keyboard and/or mouse. It also offers automatic time-coding and variable playback speeds. This would appear to be a great tool for the do-it-yourself type or the research consultant who needs really quick transcription of a small amount of audio material.

As their website says, "Transcriva strikes a balance between automation and pricing. Other software applications can turn live or recorded speech directly into text automatically, but they cost an arm and a leg and are somewhat inaccurate. What's more, they can't identify different speakers — a human is still required."

I thought I'd kick the tires on Transcriva, so I took advantage of their free trial download. They do provide a help file and help menu, but we nerds resist these things whenever possible. It took me only a few minutes of trial and error to load an .mp3 file, figure out how to do the transcription and ultimately export it into Word via a Rich Text File (.rtf).

On the Windows side (and they have a Mac version, as well), I found a free program called Express Scribe (www.nch.com.au/scribe/index.html), which seems to offer functionality very similar to Transcriva. One important difference is that they support the use of a foot pedal. Among other notable features, Express Scribe: (1) automatically receives and loads files by internet (FTP), email or over a local computer network, (2) automatically sends typing to the person who dictated the work and (3) works with speech-recognition software such as Dragon Naturally Speaking to automatically convert speech to text.

The features list goes on. According to the Express Scribe website, it works with a variety of dictation devices and media. It's quite amazing that you get all this for free. The combination of free and the ability to use a foot pedal make this one definitely worth checking out!

In fact, I downloaded this free program. Express Scribe is not nearly so transparent to figure out as Transcriva. In order to get it to see my .mp3 audio file, I had to go to the help file several times and also go onto their support forum. It took me about a half-hour to get the gist of it.

Given the cost of this program (free), you can afford to get a copy for your favorite transcriptionists and drag them kicking and screaming into the digital age. Despite the learning curve, the ability to use a foot pedal would cause me to choose Express Scribe over Transcriva. Express Scribe also has a link to a couple of companies where you can purchase pedals that plug into your USB port.

Howard: I must admit that I, too, am a gadget guy, and this sort of thing always grabs my attention. At this point, we have pretty much surmised, as you have, that most of these devices and programs are good for dictation and note-taking types of transcription.

However, a good transcription service needs not only to capture the actual verbatims, but also to provide the qualitative research consultant with parenthetical notes that reflect the emotional tone (e.g. “laughs,” “sighs,” “excited” and so on). Needless to say, a tremendous amount of programming would have to be done for a software program to do

what a transcriptionist does. The program would almost have to be human to notate the nuances that come across as respondents speak.

That said, high-end transcription services, such as ours, work hard to keep up on all the latest developments in relation to speech-recognition software and new devices designed to automate and improve the transcription process.

David: In the video realm, we are all aware that most market research facilities have begun to offer the option of sessions recorded onto DVD instead of VHS. So, of course, digital audio is present on the DVD, but I’m not sure that would be easy to work with for transcription purposes. There may be a way to pull the audio track off the DVD, but that would involve an extra step. So this set me to wondering whether facilities currently offer a way to record audio digitally.

Researching this with a few of my favorite facilities, I discovered that there has not been much demand for digital audio... yet. On those rare occasions when a qualitative researcher has

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requested it, the facilities have generally been able to accommodate the request. The best scenario, at this point, is for you to bring your own digital audio recorder, which ideally has a line-in port. Using the line-in, you should be able to jack into the facility's audio-recording setup.

Lisa Chiapetta at Fleishman Field Research in San Francisco tells of the qualitative research consultant who insisted on getting digital audio files. According to Lisa, as soon as the evening's groups were over, the consultant sent them over the internet to a country across the ocean where the transcriptionist was just waking up. The transcripts were on the client's desk the very next morning after the groups had been conducted! The transcription service pulling off this feat of international outsourcing goes by the name of Peking Duck (www.Pkingduck.com).

Howard: Actually, David, some focus facilities (e.g., the Focus Vision network) currently utilize a proprietary digital video program (Video Marker) that facilitates the digital capture and transfer of not only the video but also the audio stream. Working from the video DVD, the transcriptionist now has a visual reference for the focus group in progress and can more accurately identify respondents and their emotions as they reply to the moderator, either individually or as a group. Technological advances such as this seamlessly integrate the roles of moderator and transcriptionist, leading to an ever better qualitative-research product.

David: Howard, I have to agree that the technology for digital transcription is here and will only get better. I'm a convert. I plan to go digital from here on out. 

Given the cost of the Express Scribe program (free), you can afford to get a copy for your favorite transcriptionists and drag them kicking and screaming into the digital age.



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