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Understanding the basics of the latest digital-audio format

James Turner

Imagine putting a CD with 200 songs on it into your car radio, hitting "shuffle," and not needing to change it for a month.

That's becoming a reality for users of MP3 audio products.

Many people who have heard of MP3 may only know it has something to do with the Napster music service and its legal battles with the record industry.

But starting this year, a wide range of consumer-electronics products will support, if not embrace, this standard. The end result is an entirely new way of thinking about music.

MP3 is a way of compressing music so that while it still sounds virtually perfect as compared to the quality of a CD, it takes up much less space.

For example, a typical music CD can store 72 minutes of material. If the songs were encoded using MP3, you could fit roughly 12 hours, or about 10 times as much.

To take advantage of this new technology, you need two things: somewhere to get MP3-formatted music, and a device on which to play it.

The most noted sources of MP3 are Napster, and its cousin Gnutella. These Internet-based music-sharing services let users download MP3 files from other users. The services work best when someone with a high-speed connection trades with another high-speed user. (A song can easily take at least 15 minutes to download over the average telephone modem.)

Much of the content that travels through Napster is copyrighted, and the courts are still mulling over the legal implications of this type of sharing. Still, you can also find independent and noncopyrighted material on Napster that can be downloaded free. MP3.com also has songs available, as do many other services - some free, some not.

If you don't want to go on the Internet, you can also create MP3 files from your audio CDs using software called a "ripper."

Either way, once you have your MP3 file, you can play it on a PC by using multimedia-player software such as WinAmp, Windows Media Player, or RealPlayer.

MP3s can also be downloaded from your PC into a new generation of digital portable music players. These players typically hold 1 to 2 hours of music. The more storage space, the higher the cost of the player. Unlike a CD player, these players never skip. They are also about the size of a pickle.

Another option is to take an MP3 file and "burn" it onto a CD, using software such as Nero Burning ROM or

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