

Connecting through Music

You're walking through the park, enjoying music playing on your MP3 player. So are a lot of other people. Do you wonder what's coming through their earphones? Soon, if a device under development at the Media Lab Europe in Dublin, Ireland, makes it to market, you'll be able to listen in. Media Lab research fellow Arianna Bassoli hopes that the system, called tunA, will create social connections among people who otherwise might not interact.

TunA works like a standard MP3 player, but it also displays the playlists of all other users within 150 square meters. All tunA users can scroll through one another's playlists and listen to any music currently being played. (They cannot download each other's files.) The researchers also plan to add an instant-messaging feature. The prototype software program runs on Hewlett-Packard PocketPCs, but further development could bring a version that would run on any wireless-equipped handheld device.

This month Bassoli plans to test the prototype devices. She'll loan them for a few days to 10 students at the National College of Art and Design in Dublin. Eventually, she hopes, Media Lab partners will be interested in commercializing the technology.