

7 things you should know about...

Ustream

Scenario

Every Wednesday, Lucy and three classmates from her Comparative Political Media course meet in her dorm room to dissect the current election and the week's news cycle. With newspaper clippings strewn across the table and the television tuned to CNN, they discuss the week's political events, assembling a list of key themes and significant happenings. At 8:00 p.m., their discussion turns to planning, as ideas become talking points for the 9:00 p.m. broadcast of *The State of the State*, an hour-long program of commentary and mock debate that the group produces as a requirement for the class.

As 9:00 p.m. approaches, Lucy opens her laptop, turns on her webcam, and clicks the Broadcast Now button on her profile page at the Ustream.tv site. After a few key strokes, the four students are broadcasting their show live on the web. Their political science professor and classmates watch from their own computers, offering comments and asking questions in the chat space. As the broadcast continues, other viewers trickle in from across cyberspace, engaging the student hosts and other viewers in debate and conversation. When the program closes, Lucy archives the show, reads reviews from her classmates, and posts the URL in the course discussion forum with her reflections on that evening's program. She makes note of any URLs that her classmates have shared, bookmarking them for further reading, and considers some of the ideas for future shows. The following day, she'll log in to watch another group of students present their weekly program, Stock Reporting, and she'll be the one offering just-in-time feedback and sharing ideas in the chat room.

By the end of the semester, the class has an archive of Ustream broadcasts and discussion forum reflections, providing documented evolution of the groups' work throughout the semester. Lucy has a greater understanding of the effort and preparation involved in producing political commentary, particularly in front of a live and participatory audience. For her end-of-the-semester assessment, she can call upon an archive of independent reviews and a journal of reflections based on the interactions that she's had with viewers. She's also cultivated a growing list of international "followers" of *The State of the State* with whom she can continue to talk politics and share ideas.

What is it?

Launched in 2007, Ustream.tv is an interactive web streaming platform that lets users broadcast their own channels on the Ustream network or on a third-party website such as MySpace or Facebook. The site began as a way to connect soldiers in remote locations with their families at home by allowing for live, synchronous viewing and presenter-to-audience interaction through chat and live commenting. Founders note that the site promotes "event-casting," not just the "life-casting" made famous by sites like Justin.tv, which streams events in a person's life 24 x 7. Ustream offers a platform for users to host events, promote their own shows, or set up interactive conversations with participants across the globe. Like many Web 2.0 tools, the site functions as a social network, encouraging users to customize their profiles, identify favorite shows, create broadcast schedules, cultivate followers, add bulletins, and communicate with other users. Viewers can also rate and review shows, bolstering their standing on the site's home page. Ustream offers a mix of live programming and archived shows, giving viewers an opportunity to search for older editions of just-watched shows.

Who's doing it?

In September 2008, more than 7 million watchers turned their browsers to Ustream to watch streaming coverage of the Republican National Convention in Minneapolis–Saint Paul, Minnesota. The site has become a frequent virtual stomping ground for candidates in the 2008 election season—from local politicians hosting press conferences to national candidates engaging in dialogue with voters. Musicians like the Plain White T's and James Blunt have played to live Ustream audiences, and Hollywood has used the site to offer live streaming of movie premieres and red-carpet events. In July, Ustream reported that more than 410,000 users were streaming video—from high school graduations and weddings to amateur talk shows and how-to programs—averaging 15,000 unique shows each day. In the month of June, unique viewers passed the 10 million mark.

Colleges and universities are beginning to log on, as professors take advantage of the site's streaming abilities to host classes online or promote their research interests through interactive shows and programming. Roanoke College and Meridian Community College offer live streamed athletic events, and other campuses let viewers tune in to watch prominent guest speakers or conference sessions.

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How does it work?

Broadcasting on the Ustream network requires only an Internet connection and a webcam; membership on the site is free. Once registered, users simply enter basic information about their show, including the title, description, and any uploaded artwork, and click Start Broadcast to begin streaming. The feed is then live on the web. From the site, users can e-mail the broadcast URL to names in their address book or embed the URL in a Twitter stream. For savvy users, Ustream allows desktop screen sharing and visual overlays, such as picture-in-picture displays.

From the Ustream home page, users can watch the site's Featured programs or those that are the Highest Rated, based on user feedback through a five-star rating system. Users can also search for content by keyword or by visiting the pages of the site's themed networks, including People, Religion, Technology, and The Zoo, which features live feeds of animals eating, sleeping, and playing. Once users begin watching a video stream, they can chat live with other participants or comment on the feed. They can also connect to sites like Digg and StumbleUpon through icons below the viewing window. Registered users can keep track of their favorite shows by clicking Follow on the show's main page, where the show will instantly show up in the My Feeds section of their profile.

Why is it significant?

Although it's not the most popular web-streaming service on the market, Ustream offers an attractive new way for Internet broadcasters to connect with audiences, allowing dialogue between users and opportunities to build connections across the globe. Viewers can interact directly with the person on the screen, offering comments for the presenter or feedback in live chat, and viewers can interact with one another through impromptu dialogue around key issues. The site's easy-to-use interface makes broadcasting easy, opening the medium to any user with a webcam and a fast Internet connection. The social networking features help broadcasters cultivate and manage unique networks of users around their shows, relying on user feedback to bolster their standing on the home page and earn praise. For the viewer, these features encourage richer online interactions, giving members a chance to discover interests they have in common or to share content and ideas.

What are the downsides?

For a rich and uninterrupted viewing experience, the site requires a steady connection, making it difficult for remote students or viewers with limited bandwidth to log in. Broadcasters can stream shows for as little as 300 Kbps but with some stopping and starting in the transmission. The site's one-to-many broadcasting platform is designed to encourage two-way interaction between presenters and audiences and between viewers, but that interaction is limited to chat and commenting features, without an opportunity for viewers to participate through voice or video. The site does allow for private broadcasting, letting users password-protect a Ustream channel. This feature is particularly useful in a classroom setting for maintaining student privacy or where the global reach of the site

could create opportunities for outsiders to disrupt the classroom commentary with unsolicited content or comments.

Taking content out of the classroom and allowing outsiders to participate raises the issue of the context of information. The fact that a Ustream broadcast can be set up quickly and without explicit permission may make some instructors nervous. Similarly, inviting participation from a global community makes it more difficult for faculty to manage or limit an outside crowd's participation. It is also possible for someone to stream content from a lecture or a presentation without the permission of event organizers or speakers, making it harder to control who has access to content.

Where is it going?

The Ustream broadcasting base continues to grow as more businesses, associations, and colleges and universities add content, creating greater opportunities for free access to educational and entertainment events and for worldwide participation in virtual and physical events. The distance education market is just beginning to use this tool. As the site grows and as education budgets continue to tighten, Ustream might begin to eclipse more established—and expensive—solutions for content delivery. With the increasing ubiquity of mobile devices, streaming services such as Stickam have begun reaching into the handheld market, letting users stream video through handheld phones and other mobile devices. While Ustream has not expressed an intention to follow suit, the market, as a whole, seems to be moving in that direction.

What are the implications for teaching and learning?

Ustream has obvious implications for distance education, giving faculty free, easy-to-use options for streaming video to geographically disparate audiences. The interactive features let students post questions, share URLs, or merely strike up synchronous conversations with one another, creating a backchannel for conversations and interaction. The site's archiving features also allow faculty to keep a record of their lectures or student presentations, offering a valuable tool for reflection and review at a later date. The site's global audience also introduces new frontiers for authentic assessment in the classroom. A student-created show, for instance, could garner viewers (and reviewers) from across the globe, letting students engage in conversations with a wide audience. Students can invite family members or community experts to join the conversation, creating a rich dialogue between viewers with multiple perspectives. In a foreign-language setting, students could interact with native speakers through chat or by watching videos streamed from other countries.