

Going live on social media

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As Facebook, Twitter, YouTube et al ramp up their live video capabilities, broadcasters are jumping aboard in a bid to grow their audience and reinforce their brand, says Kate Bulkley

From breaking news events to big talent show finals and football matches, live television has always been special. Little wonder, then, that audience-hungry social media platforms are ramping up their live capabilities. So keen is Facebook to grow its live video audiences that it has agreed to pay media companies and celebrities, from CNN to Gordon Ramsay, to create videos for its platform. It's

part of a move to grow its nascent live-streaming service, Facebook Live, tap into advertising revenues and keep users tuned in to the social site.

The online portals of ITV, BT, BBC and Sky, plus sites like football fanzine Copa90 and entertainment and news hub BuzzFeed, are all trying live video. They see it as a new way to reach viewers, attract ad money and stay relevant to the typically younger people who have embraced social media platforms.

‘Live’ on social has embraced news and sport, but also includes experimentation and events.

UKTV did its first Facebook Live event in March – a 15-minute, behind-the-scenes film with magician Dynamo to help promote the next day’s broadcast of Dynamo Live on W. Some 239,000 people watched live on Facebook and there were 55,000 likes, comments and shares. The next day’s TV transmission was W’s most-watched show since launch and UKTV says the organic reach of the film is now 2.2 million. The tentative steps are turning into an “avalanche”, with a handful of live broadcasts every day now for Copa90, says site head James Kirkham.

“It gives a visceral feel to what is happening, and that helps set us apart from the ways others cover a story,” he says.

“When Leicester City came out of nowhere to win the Premiership, we were live in and around the pubs at the ground and you got this lovely continuation of all the feelings around how the match day was unfurling. We wouldn’t have been able to do that a year ago.”

YouTube, Facebook and Twitter – the latter with its Periscope streaming app – have been driving live video. Snapchat is more curated and less ‘true live’, but it too is ramping up its ‘live stories’ feature.

YouTube has been live streaming for years – who can forget Felix Baumgartner’s live jump from space for Red Bull in October 2012? But last month’s addition of live streaming to its mobile app was a step change.

For now, though, everyone’s talking about Facebook. In the past few months, it has opened up its live functionality and adjusted its algorithms to favour live video, and is paying contributors to produce it. According to The Wall Street Journal, Facebook has promised to pay close to \$50m (£38m) for live videos across 140 contracts with media

outlets and celebrities; 17 of these are worth more than \$1m (£750,000). The highest-paid publisher, BuzzFeed, is said to be in line to receive \$3.05m (£2.29m) for broadcasting live between March 2016 and March 2017. A New York Times deal is valued at \$3.03m (£2.28m), and one with CNN is worth \$2.5m (£1.88m).

Facebook is telling advertisers that the “immediate and live connection” with users’ friends and other affinity groups is what the platform is made to do best.

Brand benefits

Sky News has been live streaming on YouTube for two-and-a-half years; in April alone, it logged 2 million views. It is now creating dedicated ‘live’ content on Facebook. Between sports and news, the broadcaster plans to do more than 100 ‘live’ broadcasts a month.

“Facebook will tell you that there are 650 million sports fans on its platform and people are increasingly getting their news fix from social channels,” says Dave Gibbs, digital director of Sky Sports and Sky News. “For news, it helps us extend the Sky brand. Sports can benefit from the reach, but it’s also about telling a story in many different ways and to showcase our big events.”

Gibbs estimates that in the first two months of using Facebook Live, Sky has produced 180 events. An interactive Q&A around last month’s Anthony Joshua v Charles Martin boxing match is its biggest live event to date, with 1.5 million views, most of them live.

“It’s a different way for our audience to engage with talent,” says Gibbs. “It’s an opportunity they don’t get through our broadcasts and it’s about extending our coverage and showcasing our big events, but in a way that is credible for this audience.”

Sky is producing most of its ‘lives’ on social platforms with an iPhone, reasoning that people don’t expect a full TV-like experience, although it did rescreen a Facebook Live broadcast with Lewis Hamilton on some of its digital channels.

The most successful live streams seem to be when audiences are “waiting for something to happen” and when they can see something “a bit different”, says Gibbs – that’s a big news conference with Barack Obama about Brexit, for example, or a big sporting event – or even an exploding

watermelon.

BuzzFeed's exploding watermelon on Facebook Live got a lot of attention – 2.8 million people watched it live and concurrent views peaked at 800,000. Since Friday 8 April, when the melon was exploded – by putting an increasing number of rubber bands around it – the clip has racked up more than 10 million views.

For Kirkham, the key to making 'live' work is using several platforms at once. For Copa90's largely male sports fans, it made sense to shoot a promotional video and then do a Facebook Live with on-screen talent Saus and Cav having a table-tennis match while the newly minted promo was running on a laptop in the foreground. The wacky video received 20.5 million views and reached 191,00 people in their feeds.

"You have to know your brand and respect the audience," says Kirkham. "The minute it becomes stage-managed or 'ad-land', it reeks of not being authentic."

BT Sport stunned a lot of observers in May when it announced it would live stream both the Uefa Champions League and the Europa League finals on YouTube.

To BT, which is working hard to raise awareness of its TV service and its exclusive sports rights relative to its rival Sky, the YouTube simulcast was more of a brand-building exercise to drive people to its TV channels than a stand alone money-making venture.

BT's broader social media included an Instagram competition that created bespoke match posters, culminating with a winner being chosen on the finals weekend, plus a live story on Snapchat and Facebook Live broadcasts.

"We brought all this together under the banner that this Champions League final would be the most social broadcast ever," says BT's executive producer of digital Mike Norrish. "With YouTube as the centrepiece and all this other activity, it was something that could really make a big splash. "Pay-TV can't claim that everyone is able to watch, so this was an exciting way to bring fans into the heart of what we are doing."

Some 1.8 million people watched Real Madrid's win on BT.com, the BT Sport app and, primarily, the YouTube live stream. Add in the 4.3 million live viewers on the BT Sport

and BT Showcase TV channels and the overall audience was more than 6 million.

BT Sport & TV managing director Delia Bushell says the partnership marked a “new era of live mass broadcast for major sporting events, combining TV and digital media”. Dermot O’Leary opened the call for auditions for the latest series of The X Factor competition in May on Facebook Live, where hopefuls were allowed to pitch to take part. ITV News has also started to post live videos. Some sports organisations are embracing it too: Hero Caribbean Premier League has just announced it will stream all 34 games live on Facebook to fans in 40 countries, while the FIE Formula E electric car series is streaming live coverage of its London final to 20 countries.

“Not so long ago, you would need different technical set-ups for YouTube, Facebook and a website, for example, but now we can publish to all those at once for our clients,” says Gareth Capon, chief executive of Grabyo, Facebook’s official live-streaming partner.

“The biggest hurdle for live video previously was discovery, but social media platforms are inherently viral communities, where things can blow up quickly. Add to that Facebook prioritising live video content and the game has completely changed.”

Beyond adding new audiences that might not be watching traditional TV, broadcasters see Facebook and other social media platforms as a new and potentially large source of incremental advertising revenue.

But not everyone is happy about how the social media sites are ramping up video.

“I would say 90% of any online business is 100% dependent on Google for online video and Facebook for mobile video, and that’s great for [those platforms],” Vice Media chief executive Shane Smith told this year’s Cannes Lions advertising festival.

“But if you are beholden to them and they change the algorithm, then you have a problem. We made the decision to go platform-agnostic two years ago and it was a good idea because now you have two hegemonic powers [Google and Facebook] and the fate and manifest destiny of your business as a media company is in their hands.”

Sky works with Twitter on its Amplify programme, providing

in-game clips for the Rugby Super League, for example, and with Snapchat, where more than 70% of the audience is under 24.

“We are looking at how to extend our existing advertising partners into this, but also how to bring in new advertisers,” says Gibbs. Sky is now talking to Facebook about branded content opportunities.

The BBC Sport YouTube channel will launch this summer, but the BBC also puts a big focus on its own platforms, having seen record-breaking traffic in recent months, including 13.6 million unique views of BBC Sport on the final Sunday of the Premier League season.

On Facebook Live, presenter Gary Lineker announced Match Of The Day’s running order in October 2015, and the BBC has been doing more with Lineker and Dan Walker behind the camera throughout Euro 2016, with BBC Sport pundits also appearing on Periscope. BBC Sport digital development director Chris Hurst promises to “continue to explore opportunities to use other social platforms following the BBC’s first-ever live story with Snapchat around Sports Personality of the Year last December”.

The future is live

Outside of promotional stunts, just how much premium content will go to live streaming on social remains to be seen, but clearly some will. Facebook has Caribbean cricket and Twitter has bought the rights to live stream the Thursday night NFL games. “This allows the NFL to find a mobile-first audience,” says Capon. “The question is: does this kind of thing drive more TV audience or not? Is it substitutional or additive?”

Live is part of the story, as it is for any broadcaster, believes Stephen Nuttall, senior director of YouTube EMEA. “But live is not the only way that people are going to watch. It depends on the content. Some needs to be watched in real time and some doesn’t.” That said, YouTube’s recent announcement of a live streaming mobile app to rival Periscope and Facebook Live seems to show that the way forward is live.

TOP TIPS FOR LIVE STREAMING

1. Purpose: why live?

Define your overall objective. Engagement is up to 10 times higher for live content, but only if you are creating content

worth engaging with. What action do you want the user to take once they have viewed your content?

2. Prepare to interact

Live streaming is about interacting with the audience. Be flexible. Listening to them and giving live feedback increases editorial value and authenticity. If you don't have this capability, don't live stream.

3. Get the infrastructure right

Streams can go down, which is (literally) an audience turn-off. It happened to BuzzFeed during an interview with Barack Obama, so it can happen to anyone. Getting the streaming set-up right is key. Going live without significant wi-fi/4G or using the Live API without knowing your encoders from your video codec can catch you out.

4. Viralisation: non-live content/clips and VoD

A live stream to Facebook and/or YouTube is a brilliant engagement tool, but there is still value in sharing real-time clips/VoD with your audience, for those who do not tune in live. Think about what Instagram and Snapchat can do for you, even if your live stream is only on Facebook and YouTube.

5. Promotion: make sure people see it

A live stream needs a supporting promo ecosystem: a seeding strategy with influencers to generate views; a content strategy to develop loyal fans; and a paid campaign to target the right audience. The best live streams involve wide distribution and promotion across multiple platforms.

Prepared by Facebook's live-streaming partner

Grabyo