

# Webcasting on a shoestring (or how to broadcast on the cheap)

I presented for the first time last night at [Manchester's social media café](#). It's an open meeting for those interested in [social media](#) "to gather, get acquainted, and to plot, scheme, and share with emphasis on open and interesting conversation".

I'd just moved to Manchester on the weekend before the first meeting was held, which was a brilliant opportunity to dive straight into Manchester's digital scene and, having religiously attended the three preceding meetings, I finally took the plunge and signed-up to do a session. The topic? "**Webcasting on a shoestring**".

## Background

I was inspired by my recent experience of producing a live webcast for my work, the [Equality and Human Rights Commission](#), of our [chair Trevor Phillips](#) speaking at event to mark [ten years on from the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry](#). I was tasked with producing something that we could turn around very quickly - less than ten working days - and that could deliver decent quality video and audio to an unknown number of people.

**Why did we want to do a webcast?** After all, there were many potential risks - but also a number of benefits. First and foremost, we would have an opportunity for the Commission to **broadcast its message directly** to those interested in the issues of race and equality in Britain, unfiltered by the reporting of the media. It would also mean that anyone who was able to get a web connection could **share in marking an important anniversary** in race relations in the UK.

Within that space of time and with some advice from colleagues, I identified [ustream.tv](#) as providing a quick and convenient solution to solve the above problems. Here's how:

## Webcasting - it's not difficult (anymore!)

**Webcasting might seem difficult but it's not** - it's far cry from the old days when specialist camera equipment and Internet streaming servers were needed. The BBC were very proud of [one of their first webcasts back in 1997](#) when coverage of the Hong Kong handover was squirted out and could be received over a 28.8 kbps modem (for younger readers - that's probably slower than the slowest data mode on your iPhone).

These days, you can produce webcasts from all sorts of devices and platforms. Computers, webcams, phones - and what you decide to use depends on what kind of webcast you want and where it's being used.

## Taking the plunge

Before you decide that you really do want webcast, you need to **make some decisions**:

- **What are you going to broadcast exactly?** Is it suited for a webcast or is it better to film and place live later? Or just do audio/slides?
- **Does everyone know they're being broadcast** and will this affect the event – some people are uncomfortable with this (e.g. signers/translators) or opinion-formers; children/parents.
- **How interactive is your webcast going to be?** The Big C word is 'conversation'.
- But if you plan to take questions via the web, **you have to have a system to handle this**. Decide how you'll pick questions - whether it's the best ones, random selection and so on etc.
- How will speakers or event moderators **get hold of these questions**, especially if you're not physically nearby? The fact is, taking questions online mean nothing if they're not 'in the room' - so it's important to consider, and brief, those who will be involved in this process.
- From a PR perspective perhaps - be prepared to answer why an invite only event then being broadcast wasn't just made an open event. And consider [what might happen in the case of an unexpected issue](#). If there is an audience Q&A, will that be broadcast live online - because this can't be easily controlled. I imagine this depends on your event and organisation as to how willing you are to let this go out.

**Live on the spot** can be done easy from a mobile phone using services like [Qik.com](#) or [Bambuser](#). [Here's one](#) that [Martin](#) did of my presentation.

[vodpod  
id=Groupvideo.2048787&w=425&h=350&fv=rssURL%3Dhttp%3A%2F%2Fqik.com%2Fvideo%2F8c1a7b92850c48f3b7ee4a9d9c4f91c7.rss%26autoPlay%3Dfalse]

more about "[Qik | #smc\\_mcr](#)", posted with [vodpod](#)

But events where you have more time to set up and taking more of a broadcast rather than reportage approach can call for a more typical setup that requires **only three components**:

- **Computer/laptop** – preferably with FireWire.
- **Video camera** – with a DV/FireWire output for the above. Some good-quality webcams are absolutely fine too and usually don't need a FireWire connection.
- And of course **an Internet connection** – a WiFi/broadband connection is ideal for stability, but a medium-strong signal on a 3G USB dongle can suffice. You can test your speed using [Toast.net](#).

## Free, as in beer?

Unlike the early days of webcasting, a number of **free services now exist** that will take video from a computer and squirt it out over the Internet. Free is great, but usually it means that:

- **the service is ad-supported** - and you can't always control the ads.

- **the quality not guaranteed** - but often good for many purposes, particularly audio of a speech where it's a talking head.
- **you have to pay for premium options** like no ads or improved frame-rate - but consider if this is actually worth it. Remember, people are used to content appearing on YouTube etc which has ads all over it.

Free services are usually **based on Flash** which is generally multiplatform (Windows, Mac, Linux etc) and means that you **no longer have to invest in specialist equipment** to send video out over the web. Your web browser provides the interface through which you can send the video, which also means that viewers only need to have Flash installed to view the video. No need for squiffy, high-bandwidth Windows Media or Real Video setups - I found ustream would produce decent quality video with a bandwidth of up to 50 kb/sec upstream; this is not a big number and comfortably within the capacity of most domestic broadband connections.

## Technology problems

It's important though to be aware of some **common pitfalls**:

I've written up some more pitfalls later in the article.

As mentioned, we used a service called [ustream.tv](http://ustream.tv) that would broadcast our event live and, despite the above limitations, fulfil the brief of a quick turnaround, cheap (free!) and reasonable quality. It's actually very easy to use, and can easily accept video and audio from a FireWire cable such as that from a digital video camera.

## Resourcing the day itself

Of course, planning a webcast is **not just about technology, it's also about resourcing** - and people who need to be there:

- As mentioned, using a mobile phone, a single person can record, stream live video to the web over 3G or WiFi.
- One person can also operate a static camera and computer, **but it's not easy!** In particular, one person does make live interactivity more of a challenge.
- **Two person operation is good** – they can act camera operator and a tech person (or "producer" if you will). This also gives the tech person a chance to monitor - and engage in - debate online. Ustream provides a chat facility that people can use to discuss the event live with other people.
- Ideally, perhaps, three people but this is quite a lot of resource for something that isn't necessarily supposed to be resource-intensive anyway. The third person can work on monitoring the debate around and during the event, as well as managing Q&As, while the tech person only has to focus on ensuring the webcast is up and running.

## Getting people talking

Executing a webcast is **just one part of getting more people involved** in your event. The other part is promoting it and generating some debate around the issue.

Our event was intended to initiate an important debate about race and equality in Britain so the webcast was a key (well, low-key) part of that.

Since this was going to be the first time that we had produced a webcast, we were keen to ensure that those who watched it had a good experience but that we didn't want to oversell it. **It was a prototype** and one that could of course see many improvements. But **generating discussion online and getting people talking** ('buzz') around a webcast is something we will be doing more of.

- Blog about it, tweet about it and **get people talking**.
- That **slightly dirty word... 'blogger engagement'**... but...it is sensible to find out who'd be interested in your webcast and who may wish to watch and write about it. If you know them, it's easier to approach them of course but if you are making a new contact, I'd suggest you take a very [personal, honest and well-researched approach](#), rather than the [hamfisted approach I have seen some examples of](#): bloggers are not journalists!
- Prior to the day of the event, and if you haven't done so already - [setup a Twitter account](#). Ustream lets you **tweet live from the event** and link to it - so you can announce when you're live.
- **Announce a hashtag in advance** – on Twitter, on the event page and **on press releases** or other output. On a press release you say? Well consider this: [Twitter is now mainstream](#) (thanks [@ewanspence](#)). Tell that to your press team :)

[Live-blogging](#) / [live-tweeting](#) from the event are great ways of keeping the debate going during the event, keeping those who can't attend engaged and providing a platform from which people can discuss afterwards. It also means you don't have to rely on posting comments in the Ustream/video streaming chatroom to get debate going. I personally found the following tools useful:

- [Splittweet.com](#): especially if you're using a work laptop onto which you can't install applications. Splittweet let' you post to multiple Twitter accounts at once and monitor mentions of your brand/organisation or hashtag, based on terms you supply to the system. One word of warning though - it has an annoying 'ding' sound that can affect your streaming audio quality - turn it off under the 'Profile' option (I couldn't work this out :)).
- [TweetDeck](#), the quintessential, multiplatform Twitter client (provided if you can download and install stuff) also performs the same sort of function in a funkier way. Just watch out for your API - if you are requesting too much information from Twitter in a short space of time, you can exceed your 'API request limit' and then will have to wait for this to be reset. Splittweet doesn't seem to have this problem.

## Some pitfalls!

Doing a webcast is great, but not something that is best achieved in isolation from the rest of the event planning. A successful webcast should be well-integrated into the event. Some pitfalls to bear in mind:

- **An unfamiliarity with technology** - have a go and test it out well before time - not just the morning or the day before! I gave a demonstration of ustream at

the event, but it's worth just trying it out for yourself rather than me detailing it. [There's a tutorial here](#) which goes into a bit more detail including discussing other handy tools and tips that I wasn't able to go into, such as branding your webcast through and embedding it.

- **Unexpected incompatibilities** - slow Internet/no Internet in location; camera won't connect because of the wrong cable or software problems
- **A venue/event not suited to webcasting** - lighting poor, bad sound or one you have seen before. **A recce of the venue is essential** to test the system in 'near-live' conditions. You can test the network connection (test stream back to the office?), ensuring that the laptop etc smoothly connects or that you have at least a medium-strong 3G signal. You can also check the physical space and consider issues of lighting, manoeuvring and power points!
- **Not being involved in the event planning before the day** - colleagues would benefit from knowing what you'll be doing and what impact it might have on the event. At the very least, you won't know where to point the camera! Linked to this...
- **Not knowing who's speaking** - sounds silly but if you get their names and a pic before time, you know to look out for them, especially if there is a panel of speakers.
- **Others not being aware of your presence** - as alluded to, some people may have odd reactions to webcasting, while it still seen as relatively 'new'. There may also be copyright issues, if say you're in an art gallery or [Manchester Town Hall](#).
- **Managing expectations** - I think this is relatively important. A webcast using free tools like the above has limitations - ads, quality, no dedicated infrastructure to guarantee quality 100% - but as long as this is made clear and understood, then it should be manageable. If you prefer not, look at premium options that are out there, including paid-for ustream.
- **Q&As** - it's important to be honest and upfront about whether you're going to take questions from online, as part of the webcast, or from Twitter. We decided that we wouldn't, partly as it was a pilot, time was limited and it would be difficult to get the questions up onto the stage from where the webcast was happening in the venue. But if you are going to, let people know how it might happen and how you're going to manage it. Or, just turn off the chat.
- **Recording your webcast** – make sure you do record the webcast as it happens live - ustream has a second button you click to do this. Therefore, you can link to it online within minutes or a couple of hours after the webcast has happened (it needs a bit of processing time). But remember you can't easily edit the recording. Ustream does let you post the webcast to YouTube, download it as a Flash Video file (and in some other formats up to a certain length) but editing this is extra work and the quality is webcast quality – not a permanent archive. It may be worth ensuring that there is enough tape in the camera and that you have hit the record button while it's running, or getting a second camera - to ensure you have a permanent, high-quality archive of the event.

## Measurement

Remember, you're doing the webcast 'on a shoestring' so this has big benefits in terms of the bottom-line: and in terms of proving that a webcast can be an effective

way of reaching an audience, prior to embarking on investing in an enterprise-level solution.

You can measure the direct viewer numbers very simply on ustream - it's all listed under the My Shows, 'Metrics'. It indicates how many unique viewers watched your webcast and also how many total views it received (including visitors who logged on a second time, after a break perhaps, or who have watched a second instalment).

What is a bit more difficult to measure is the impact the webcast achieves in spreading your message. Using the hashtag, you can [search Twitter](#) to find out how many different people are talking about your event. [Google Blog Search](#) can also help in discovering if any of your blogger engagement was successful.

## Conclusion

With a bit of planning, webcasting is simple and relatively cheap to do. Yes, there is an outlay in terms of computer and camera equipment, but this is stuff that is often already available - or can be sourced cheaply, e.g. a good quality webcam. Making sure you know why you want to do a webcast, how interactive it's going to be and then ensuring you promote it appropriately through Twitter, blogs and other digital channels, are important for attracting an audience and generating the debate that you want about it. Finally, **enjoying playing with the technology** - it's so rewarding to learn how to do something new like a webcast and achieve something that until recently seemed to be the preserve of big corporates!