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METRO MONEY

Webcam Feeds of New York City Draw Viewers Trapped in Lockdown

Folks around the world who can't board a plane use cams to 'travel' to the city



While webcams hark back to the early days of the internet, the technology itself has grown in sophistication.

PHOTO: WESLEY BEDROSIAN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



By

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Dec. 29, 2020 10:00 am ET



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When streaming video service VUit launched in September, the coronavirus upended its plans to broadcast live shows from its Manhattan studio. On a whim, employees turned the studio's camera out the window to face the nondescript corner of Sixth Avenue and 39th Street. The 24-hour street-scene feed quickly became the service's most popular channel, beating out dozens of live news and sports broadcasts.

Last week, I watched the online feed with Jack Perry, the CEO and founder of VUit's parent company, Syncbak, and asked him to narrate the action.

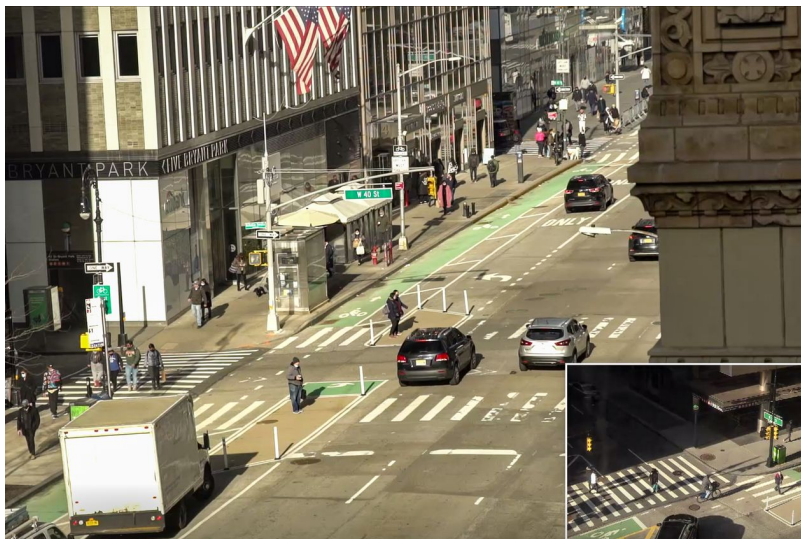
"There goes three shoppers," he said, as several pedestrians traversed the crosswalk.

A few moments passed.

"Look, someone's carrying their Starbucks. And there's a FedEx truck," he said. "That's the second time it's come around."

"There's someone walking with a DeWalt drill," he continued. "That's interesting. That's the drill I have."

In other words, nothing was happening. But during the pandemic, live-stream feeds of Manhattan streetscapes like VUit's "Studio 39" cam have surged in popularity as folks who can't travel seek unfiltered views of Manhattan.



VUit's 'Studio 39' cam broadcasts a street view from its Manhattan studio.

PHOTO: VUIT

SkylineWebcams, which streams ad-supported live feeds from more than 1,100 cameras around the globe, says its New York City-based feeds saw a big surge in viewers during the lockdown. In February, for instance, its 42nd Street cam drew 12,200 viewers. In March, that number surged to 923,623. Traffic has since declined, but the feed was still drawing more than 100,000 views a month this fall.

Webcam feeds have played a big role in telling the story of the pandemic, the company says. Viewers first tuned in to gawk at the empty streets, and then to watch the crowds slowly return.

New York City views are the biggest draw in the webcam universe, says Brian Cury, CEO and founder of Upper Saddle, N.J.-based EarthCam, which is generally regarded as the industry leader. “The world is a stage and New York City is the epicenter,” he says. “When we have a big event, people like to see how New York is dealing with it.”

In 2020, he says, views of the company’s New York feeds on its own site and YouTube, which include Times Square, the Empire State Building and Fifth Avenue, rose 929% to more than 34 million streams. People spent 2.5 million hours watching, an 818% increase over the prior year.

The trend has produced a nice bump in ad revenue for the company. A feed from one camera in Times Square can generate \$5,000 a month, Mr. Cury says.

It sounds like an easy way to make a quick buck. All it takes to get started is a \$50 HD cam and a broadband connection. One can typically earn \$2 to \$4 in ad revenue per 1,000 video-ad views.

It is simple enough to rig up that some local nonprofits offer webcams as a public service. You can currently watch a live feed of the skate rink at Bryant Park, the sea lion pool at the Bronx Zoo or the kitten cam at the Brooklyn Cat Cafe—which recently attracted a manic following for Elmira, a one-eyed calico, and Kedi, who bore a striking resemblance to Baby Yoda.



An EarthCam broadcast from Times Square.

PHOTO: EARTHCAM

But Mr. Cury, who launched the first EarthCam live feed back in 1996 (it featured a tiny 1/13 megapixel image updated once a minute), says it takes a lot of time and money to maintain the company's global network of several thousand live cameras year after year, which is what it takes to build an audience of millions. The internet is littered with the dead feeds of failed rivals.

“Over the years, many people have tried and we buried 'em!” says Mr. Cury.

The majority of EarthCam's business actually comes from private developers and contractors who want webcams to monitor and document construction projects—such as Hudson Yards—and government agencies that use them to monitor traffic and other conditions.

But over the years, the company has also built a steady following for its publicly available, ad-supported virtual tourism streams focusing on everything from national parks—including a feed from a camera installed inside the Statue of Liberty's torch—to an often snowy intersection of Cavalier, N.D., which has received 12 million views. My favorite: A 24-hour feed of Andy Warhol's grave in Bethel Park, Pa., which has been viewed 10 million times. I'm sure Mr. Warhol would approve.

While webcams hark back to the early days of the internet—along with Beanie Baby auctions and AltaVista web searches—the technology has grown in sophistication. During the pandemic, for example, EarthCam developed artificial-intelligence technology, which can detect and feature particularly attractive scenes, such as a spectacular sunset or rays of light glittering off a skyscraper. It now offers an evolving live stream of such feeds from around the world on its EarthCamTV app, which has 25 million viewers.

But these days, people largely like to see other people. Mr. Perry, who travels between homes in Manhattan and Cedar Rapids, Iowa, where he owns a bar, says he's tried airing VUit's 39th Street feed in his establishment instead of the ballgame. Now, customers who don't know he owns VUit frequently ask him to put on “That New York City channel.”

“It's just the allure of the greatest city in the world, and there's a corner,” he says. “Let's just sit and watch it!”

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