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A Trial Period for Virtual Connectivity During a Global Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced millions of people out of work and left them quarantined in their homes. By March 11th, 2020, New York University students and faculty had to begin to figure out how to learn virtually as the virus surged outside.¹ The decision to value the lives of citizens or keep the economy open and capitalism became a frequent topic of debate. One of the key tactics to "flatten the curve" of the virus was to create social distance of six feet or more between anyone venturing outside.² Close quarters and gathering in groups were no longer recommended and then they were banned in many places.

Anyone with access to a decent internet connection started to stream and share digital content online in a more frequent manner than before. Preliminary estimates had stated the internet usage was up 50 – 70% while sites that stream content such as Netflix, Disney+, YouTube saw 12% growth.³ Even with those numbers Walt Disney Company announced that it

¹ Communications, NYU Web. "Important New Coronavirus-Related Measures and Restrictions, and Possible Future Steps." <http://www.nyu.edu/content/nyu/en/about/leadership-university-administration/office-of-the-president/communications/important-new-coronavirus-related-measures-and-restrictions-and-possible-future-steps>.

² CDC. "Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) - Transmission." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, April 13, 2020. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/how-covid-spreads.html>.

³ Beech, Mark. "COVID-19 Pushes Up Internet Use 70% And Streaming More Than 12%, First Figures Reveal." Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/markbeech/2020/03/25/covid-19-pushes-up-internet-use-70-streaming-more-than-12-first-figures-reveal/>.

will stop paying roughly 100,000 employees.⁴ Many of these employee layoffs were related to theme parks, there were also studio layoffs as well but that exact number is unclear. The pandemic presented a new opportunity for individuals, collectives, cultural institutions, corporations to connect to a captive audience. Art galleries such a long time New York gallery PPOW that could no longer host in-person shows created virtual screening rooms for online exhibition.⁵ Lincoln Center canceled all events until August 2020 while offering digital content from its archive.⁶ Museums like The Met laid off 80 employees and projected that they would lose \$150 million during COVID-19 as of April 23rd, 2020.⁷ With no way to host nightlife events, members of the gig economy also created and curated broadcasts via Instagram Live and Twitch.tv.⁸ Websites like nyc-noise⁹ created resource links for relief funding for musicians and government bills needing support to pass a rent freeze. Nyc-noise also hosted a community-generated calendar of musician live streams and their respective donation links. People felt a sense of urgency to generate lost income and stay connected in some way. There was a palpable push to claim digital space as physical space become uninhabitable by the virus.

As the reality of the quarantine and my increasingly virtual screen world began to sink in, I, too, started to create live stream broadcasts. I decided I would schedule a stream every Sunday from 3 pm – 6 pm EST for April 2020. I learned how to broadcast digital moving image content using the platform twitch.tv since it was free to sign-up. To live stream with twitch.tv you need

⁴ “Disney Leads Pack of Industry Cutbacks | Los Angeles Business Journal.”

<https://labusinessjournal.com/news/2020/apr/27/disney-leads-pack-industry-cutbacks/>.

⁵ PPOW Gallery, Hell is a Place on Earth. Heaven is a Place in Your Head. <https://www.hellisaplaceonearth.com>.

⁶ NPR.org. “New York’s Lincoln Center Cancels All Programming Through The End Of August.”

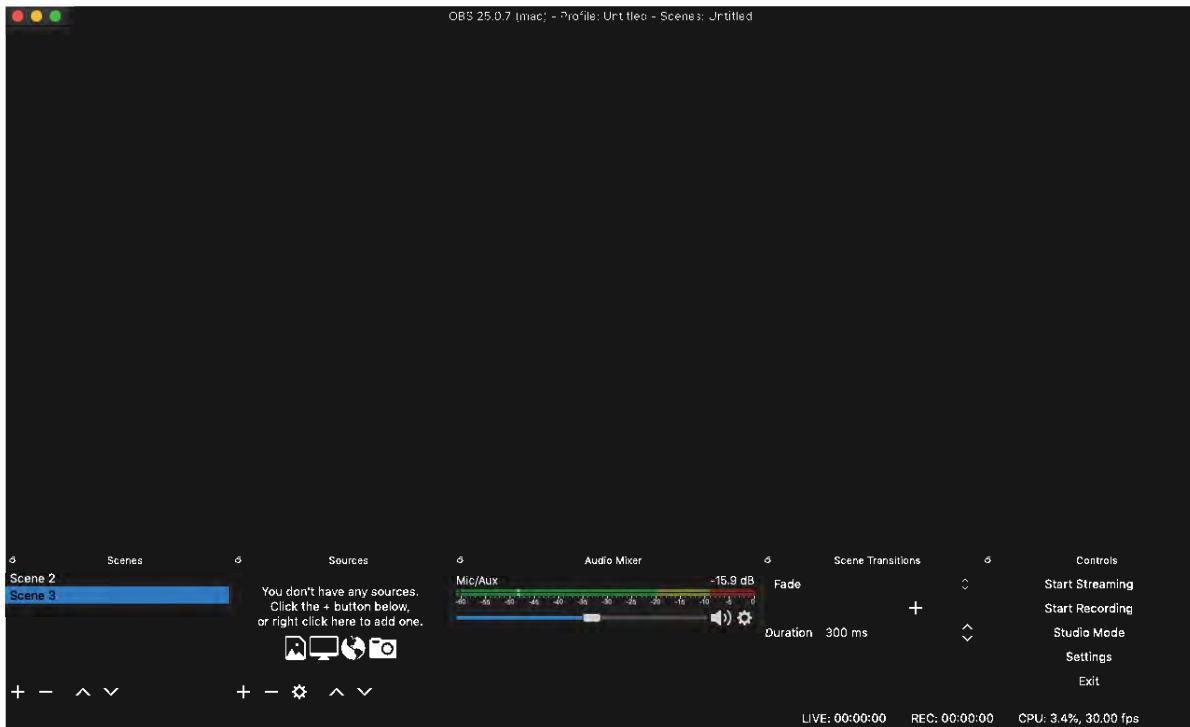
<https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/04/09/831209637/new-yorks-lincoln-center-cancels-all-programming-through-the-end-of-august>.

⁷ Kamp, Justin. “Metropolitan Museum Lays off More Than 80 Workers Amid Fears of \$150-Million Shortfall.” Artsy, April 23, 2020. <https://www.artsy.net/news/artsy-editorial-metropolitan-museum-laid-80-employees-fears-150-million-shortfall-covid-19>.

⁸ A Sample listing of broadcast streams and events see APPENDIX.

⁹ nyc noise. “Nyc Noise | (Links to) Good Soundz.” <https://nyc-noise.com/>.

broadcasting software.¹⁰ I chose to use OBS (Open Broadcaster Studio) because it was free and open-source.



OBS GUI interface, 2020.

I have an extensive collection of personal videos on two 2TB hard drives spanning individual and collective performances from 2012 – present. I edited together three hours of content collected from my digital repository. One of the biggest initial challenges that I encountered was the issue that a three-hour 720p .mp4 exported from iMovie ended up being upwards of 10 – 12 GB. To make these files smaller and optimized for web streaming I used another open-source program called HandBrake.¹¹ HandBrake can transcode video, which means it can convert a digital video file and encode it into another digital video file. This process is desirable when to want your video to be in another format or if you want to manage the storage

¹⁰ “Customer Support.” https://help.twitch.tv/s/article/recommended-software-for-broadcasting?language=en_US.

¹¹ “HandBrake: Open Source Video Transcoder.” <https://handbrake.fr/>.

size of your video file. I have made three tutorial videos uploaded to archive.org to explain the process of exporting video files in iMovie to iTunes, creating smaller video files with HandBrake, and operating OBS with twitch.tv.¹²

So far, I have completed a total of six three-hour live streams using OBS and twitch.tv, but I am not sure how many more I can do. Zoom fatigue is setting along with a societal expectation to maintain productive, which requires a high level of screen time. As I write this, there is no real end in sight for this pandemic. Right now, estimates are up to 18 months to create a vaccine.¹³ 2020 is an incredibly uncertain time for the global economy. Being a graduate student at New York University to pursue a degree in moving image archiving and preservation, the question "what is worth saving?" keeps playing on repeat in my mind. When we do begin to meet again in person and so the amount of "normalcy" returns will the people and institutions that have quickly adopted these virtual technologies continue to use them beyond the current crisis? I do not think I can speculate too much on that. However, I would say that if these communication technologies were a desirable mode of interacting for institutions, they would have implemented widely before COVID-19 made them the only option.

¹² *Diy Broadcasting during Covid-19*. <http://archive.org/details/diybroadcastingduringcovid19>.

¹³ NPR.org. "Timetable For A Vaccine Against The New Coronavirus? Maybe This Fall." <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/02/12/804628081/timetable-for-a-vaccine-against-the-new-coronavirus-maybe-this-fall>.

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NPR.org. “Timetable For A Vaccine Against The New Coronavirus? Maybe This Fall.”
<https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/02/12/804628081/timetable-for-a-vaccine-against-the-new-coronavirus-maybe-this-fall>.

nyc noise. “Nyc Noise | (Links to) Good Soundz.” <https://nyc-noise.com/>.

APPENDIX

Sample offering of broadcast streams and events:

NPR.org. “A List Of Live Virtual Concerts To Watch During The Coronavirus Shutdown.”
<https://www.npr.org/2020/03/17/816504058/a-list-of-live-virtual-concerts-to-watch-during-the-coronavirus-shutdown>.

nyc noise. “Nyc Noise | (Links to) Good Soundz.” <https://nyc-noise.com/>.

<https://www.twitch.tv/dragalive>

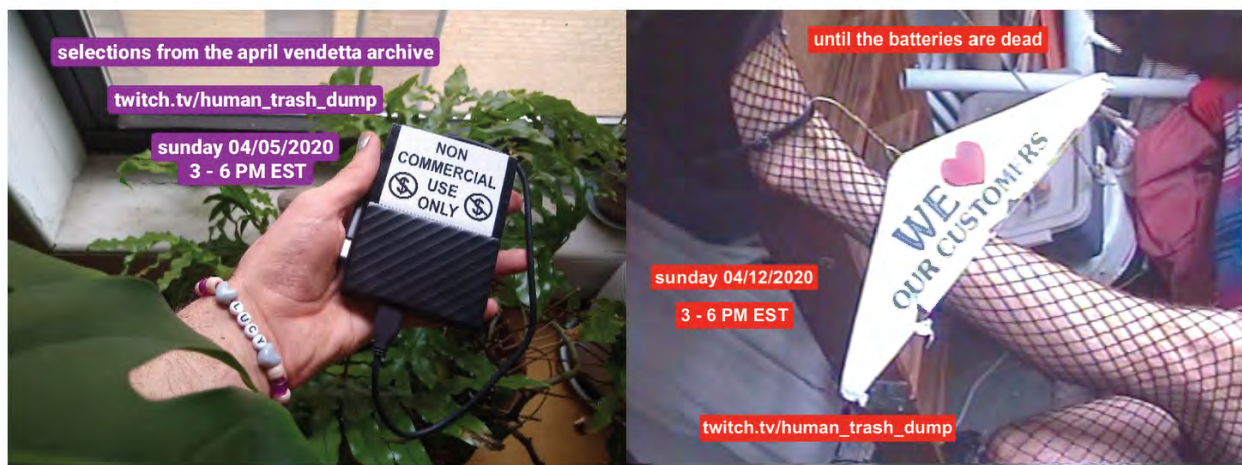
<https://www.twitch.tv/darkenergympls>

https://www.twitch.tv/experimental_sound_studio

https://www.twitch.tv/human_trash_dump

<https://www.twitch.tv/princess4ever>

<https://www.twitch.tv/spectaclenyc>



A selection of digital flyers created by David I. Griess to promote twitch.tv broadcasts content generated for personal and collective digital A/V archives. 2020.