

New streaming apps could boost citizen journalism

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When three buildings collapsed and ignited a blaze in New York, a smartphone app brought the live video feed to anyone online wanting to watch.

The disaster took place, coincidentally, the same day as the launch of

Twitter's new livestream app Periscope, which became a window for the breaking news event.

The event showed how Periscope and rival app Meerkat, which can deliver live video through Twitter to anyone online, could become an important tool for citizen journalism.

By feeding live video through Twitter to anyone online, these apps eliminate the need to upload to YouTube or transfer to broadcasters like CNN to get a wide audience.

While social media has empowered citizen journalism for years, the use of live video could become a powerful tool for these reporters and change the way people get news.

"It's not just that you can upload your video, but you can upload it to the social network, which is vastly more powerful than the Web because of that network of relationships and the virality," said Jeff Howe, a Northeastern University professor who specializes in media innovation.

"This offer a great advantage to citizen journalists."

Howe said some earlier streaming video applications like Bambuser helped spread information during the Arab Spring and Occupy protests, but that he sees "a more real-time, immediacy aspect" to the new apps like Meerkat and Periscope.

Unexpected events

Dan Gillmor, an Arizona State University journalism professor and author of a book on citizen journalism, agreed that these easily used tools can raise the profile for citizen journalism.



Although technology for live streaming has been available for years, the widespread use of smartphones, improved networks and the integration with Twitter could make these tools more potent, analysts say

"When something newsworthy is happening where it is unexpected, the odds that a professional journalist holding a camera or video camera are small. But the odds that a regular person will be there are close to 100 percent."

The New York fire highlighted the potential for these tools, Gillmor said, but some situations could be even more dramatic.

"Suppose we had real-time video from someone who was in the front of that (Germanwings) plane (which crashed) over the Alps, showing us a video of the captain trying to get into the cockpit," Gillmor told AFP.

"We would have a much more graphic and quite terrifying understanding of what happened."

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"There's nothing quite like live video to put people in the moment when it comes to breaking news," said Josh Stearns, who follows citizen journalism at the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation.

And Stearns said the apps offer a "more intimate connection" because "they allow people to interact, to ask questions, to get a different view. They aren't just passively watching."

Meerkat, which debuted in February, and newly launched Periscope both offer live streaming, while only the latter allows the footage to be archived for later use.



A key question is whether the growth in live smartphone video will shed fresh light on key events

After Meerkat's spectacular launch, Twitter limited access to its network to make it harder to spread through the microblogging service. But Meerkat appeared unfazed and unveiled a fresh \$14 million in funds to fuel expansion.

Human rights tool?

The Periscope team hinted at possibilities for journalistic use of the platform, with a blog saying, "What if you could see through the eyes of a protester in Ukraine?"

A key question is whether the growth in live smartphone video will shed fresh light on key events, such as shootings involving police in the

United States or human rights abuses in totalitarian countries.

"It would have been helpful to have footage of the Ferguson shooting," Howe said of the Missouri killing of unarmed black youth Michael Brown which sparked national protests.

An open question is whether these new technologies will help the flow of information in countries with repressive regimes such as North Korea and Cuba.

Gillmor said he believes that activists who stream live video from one of these countries would be "dumb, given that mobile networks are either part of the government or intertwined with it."

But Howe said the technology will eventually bring more abuses to light, "because it's going to become harder to shut down the information flow."

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