

New video-streaming apps turn TV stars into phone friends

April 16 2015, by Frazier Moore



This Tuesday, April 14, 2015 photo released by Joshua Malina shows the "Scandal" actor interacting with fans using Periscope in his trailer in Burbank, Calif. Periscope users can upload their video streams for on-demand playback over the next 24 hours. (Joshua Malina via AP)

"Scandal" star Joshua Malina has a brand-new video gig. So do "Today" weathercaster Al Roker, "NBC Nightly News" anchor Lester Holt and

CNN media correspondent Brian Stelter.

Now viewers can catch a glimpse of them, along with such programs as "Late Night" and "The Ellen DeGeneres Show," in a new way—live, impromptu and often charmingly artisanal.

And they're not the only ones.

It seems like only yesterday (and pretty much was) that Periscope and Meerkat burst on the scene, live video-streaming apps that work on iPhones.

Suddenly, everyone, from Jimmy Fallon and Tyra Banks to, well, someone like you can stream live video. And Periscope users can upload their video streams for on-demand playback over the next 24 hours.

No longer will your public, such as it is, be deprived of watching you in real time doing whatever you do as conveyed by your phone.

(And what a few of you may do, or try, is sharing copyrighted material—like the wildly popular HBO fantasy drama "Game of Thrones," which was carried on Periscope accounts by pirating users holding their iPhones up to their TV screens. HBO sent "take down notices" to the Twitter-owned Periscope, which said it complies with U.S. copyright law and will respond to valid requests.)

While viewers watch what you "broadcast," they can respond to you with instant text messages.

If that's not sufficiently wondrous (or appalling—yes, at least one person has broadcast live from his commode), consider what this means for the celebrity world, and for TV stars in particular, who suddenly have, in the palms of their hands, the ability to engage their fans through this

newfangled brand of backstage video.

In the few weeks since these apps arrived, early adopters include "Late Night," which has shared its band warming up; "Ellen," which puts viewers literally behind the scenes while an episode is being taped; Roker playing Periscope host at the "Today" studio, and Holt, wielding his iPhone for an anchor's-eye view from behind his "Nightly News" desk.

So far, the audience for such meta-sightings seldom exceeds the low hundreds—a microscopic number by any television standard, but a hint of the potential for a service few had even heard of just a week or two before.

"Of course, the audiences are small. It's a nascent world," says Julian March, NBC News' senior vice president of innovation and digital strategy. "But when audiences do engage, they really engage. And you get that real-time feedback loop to understand who's engaging, which provides a great basis from which to move forward."

Among early efforts by Chris Hayes, host of MSNBC's "All In": Inviting fellow Periscopers into his office for an editorial meeting as he and his staffers discussed that night's telecast while passing an iPhone like a talking stick.

"Those spaces are private spaces for a reason," says Hayes, "and I don't think we'll be Periscoping our entire process every day. But it did seem like an interesting way to give people a window into how we go about making the show, and I think we'll be doing more of it."

Earlier this month, the Starz network wielded an iPhone and Periscope to capture the red carpet at its Manhattan "Outlander" premiere. At the peak, some 3500 viewers were on board.

"It was a really good experience," says Alison Hoffman, Starz executive vice president of marketing. "And if viewers are hungry for this level of 'uber access,' it doesn't have to be limited to a produced event. We could use it for conversations with our talent. We could pop down to Cape Town (South Africa), where 'Black Sails' is filmed, and walk around the set."

Actor Joshua Malina is already heavily into Periscope, treating it not just as a way to connect with his fans but as a new creative outlet.

Malina plays U.S. Attorney General David Rosen on "Scandal," the hit ABC thriller-melodrama, and, with 170,000 Twitter followers, he has long been active in social media.

He says he tried Periscope for the first time a few weeks ago, unobserved at home while wife and kids were away.

"There's a lot of side-eye from the family when you set up a camera and start babbling to strangers: 'What is Dad doing NOW?'" he says with a laugh. "I just pressed 'Start Broadcast' and the questions started coming. And I'm always happy to answer that, yes, (castmate) Tony (Goldwyn) is as handsome in person as he looks on TV."

Since then, Malina has made a welcome habit during down-time at the studio of signing on for his so-called Trailer Talks, short chummy interludes like Skypeing with a friend.

"But now I'm trying to think of ways for content that goes beyond, 'Hey! Ask me anything!'" Such as: "Maybe my 'Scandal' cast-mates and I can re-enact classic scenes from the show—maybe swapping roles."

A few days ago, he conducted a mock "guided meditation" that he promised, deadpan, would bring his viewers clarity and peace of mind.

"Settle into your bed," he purred from his trailer under subdued light—"or on your futon and ask yourself, 'Why do I still have a futon?' They're sooo lame. Tell yourself it's time to grow up and get a real bed. "

Is iPhone-packing Malina a pioneer of social media's next big act? Are his up-close-and-personal video streams a harbinger of heightened access viewers not only will greet but will come to expect from every TV show and personality?

"I don't think this is a fad," Malina says. "I think this is a great leap forward for interaction and promotion."

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