

Inside Snapchat's newest feature: Story Explorer

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Snapchat Inc. Chief Executive Evan Spiegel grabs his iPhone, opens his Los Angeles company's app and taps an icon for "Los Angeles."

Instantly, he's watching short, full-screen videos that Snapchat users across LA have recorded over the last 24 hours and given the company permission to distribute widely. It's a stream that jumps from a concertgoer's view at a One Direction performance in Hollywood to someone else's shot of a new car at the Los Angeles Auto Show to scenes at a Clippers game.

The sort-of "what's happening" in Los Angeles video is typical of the handful of Live Stories that greet Snapchat users daily. Beside cities, they chronicle holidays, presidential debates, fashion shows and more, on average drawing 10 million to 20 million viewers.

But they're also a tease: What about all the other cars at the Auto Show? Or how about a close-up of Blake Griffin, please?

Story Explorer, a new Snapchat feature that debuted this week, aims to address the issue, Spiegel says. It enables users to see more than just one or two vantage points of a moment.

As Spiegel put it, users don't have to settle for one view of a big NFL touchdown, for instance. They can view it "thousands" of times - each one unique - because so many people in the stadium filmed the play on Snapchat.

"The basic idea was we don't provide any depth inside Stories - you're on the red carpet. Then you're at a concert for a split-second," Spiegel said during an interview last week. "It was a feeling of 'show me more,' and we're fortunate that we just get so much video submitted to us that we had the ability from a content perspective to provide depth."

Snapchat employees will continue to pick the interesting situations highlighted in a Live Story. But during any individual clip, users can swipe up on their smartphone screens to see about 10 similar shots. If there are still more, users are prompted to swipe to "explore" again. They swipe down to return to the main stream.

The new feature is another indication that Snapchat is emerging as a creative leader in the fast-growing medium of mobile video.

"From a creative standpoint, the canvas Snapchat provides is a standout," said Cathy Boyle, senior analyst for mobile at Emarketer.

Mobile video consumption for the average adult is estimated to grow nearly 12 percent next year, Boyle said. It's a crowded field, with Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Periscope, Vine and more delivering videos to smartphones - not to mention companies like Netflix and Hulu that offer TV and movies. But Snapchat has become a staple, used by more than 60 percent of 13- to 34-year-olds in the U.S., the company says.

The computer vision technology used to power Story Explorer is only the latest in a string of Snapchat video innovations, which also include having the app immediately engage a smartphone's camera; the Live Stories themselves; and its Discover collection of branded channels, where established media companies such as CNN and Vice conduct their own experiments with video presentation.

In Story Explorer, an expansive and expensive array of computers analyzing video submissions chooses the content shown in Story Explorer. They'll consider objects in videos, submission times and locations, and other data that Snapchat's keeping quiet about.

Story Explorer is important to Snapchat's business because it could increase usage. Video on Snapchat is viewed 6 billion times a day, but user submissions are 10 seconds or less.

Increasing the amount of video seen means more viewing time to show ads, which are Snapchat's primary revenue generator. Spiegel declined to say whether Story Explorer would lead to new types of ads.

"We'll let it go and see what happens," he said.

Companies could be wary about placing ads in Story Explorer because the content isn't curated by people, Boyle said.

"Brands want to have some reassurance that they are not going to expose themselves to content that's not fitting to their brand," she said. "The longer someone is spending with the Stories is a good thing, but I don't know if it will offer more ad inventory."

Story Explorer also could give people a new reason to open Snapchat. Although user-generated media apps such as YouTube and Twitter have become key places to get on-the-ground perspectives on news, Snapchat has lagged behind: The lack of a search feature on Snapchat makes it tough to find lots of video about a particular incident.

Spiegel showed how Story Explorer increases Snapchat's utility as a go-to news source, using a shooting scare near UCLA's campus, located in LA's Westwood neighborhood, as an example.

"You want to see it. You want to hear it," he said. "Now you can as a thousand different people on the streets of Westwood. That's really powerful."

Of course, Snapchat's core users - young women and girls - might find seeing hundreds of angles of One Direction even more thrilling.

"It's sick," Spiegel effused.

"Jumping" into the bodies of so many other people creates a feeling of "experiencing" something, which separates Snapchat from traditional video "watching" services, he said.

Jeff Sonderman, deputy director at the research group American Press Institute, said Snapchat's push to evolve from a visual messaging app to a forum for news and current events follows similar moves by Facebook and other social apps. In part, it helps bring in a bigger, older audience.

"How do you use something like Snapchat if you don't feel comfortable sharing selfies or you don't have an interesting life?" he said. "Is there a browsable experience of things that are public and newsworthy? That's what they are getting at with this feature."

The extra videos still could lack details necessary for viewers to understand what they're seeing, but Snapchat has sought to close the context gap through content deals. At many sporting events now, users can automatically overlay the current score on a video submission. More partnerships are likely to follow.

Story Explorer is launching on locally viewable Stories for Los Angeles and New York before quickly expanding to all stories, Spiegel said.

Since workers don't pre-screen Story Explorer, users are asked to report

inappropriate content, including violent or sexually explicit images, by holding down on a [video](#) for a few seconds while it is playing, which will trigger a pop-up to report an issue.

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