

Streaming Out 1 - Brighton Dome & Festival + Brighton City College (Carol Britten & Jim Lee)

START AUDIO 0:00:03

Carol Britten: Thank you and hello everyone. Thanks to Honor and also to Jon, actually. I felt that I was glad we were on first. Because I thought we were here really because actually we have just been taking our first steps into live-streaming events, finally. And it's with great thanks to Jon and the support of the Arts Council that we have been able to do that.

So this is really us sharing a bit about actually the process we went through and that sort of ideal, that actually what do you do when you've had this idea that you want to stream a series of your live events to get it out there and why?

So, yes, that's us.

I'm just going to work out how to operate my – that's right. Brilliant.

So just first of all, a little bit about what we were hoping to achieve.

We were really looking to see whether we could come up with a model, that was affordable and sustainable, that would help us to stream a series of events year round. And also specifically during Brighton Festival.

Through the project, I think we feel we're on our way to doing that. That's been very much due to finding appropriate and effective partnerships. That's why I'm delighted that Jim is here to join me today to talk about our experience.

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So a little bit about Brighton Dome Festival first.

So we are a year-round operation and we're on the doorstep and we operate the three very flexible spaces that are Brighton Dome, our historic building next to the Royal Pavilion. Built in 1808, the Brighton Dome was in fact originally the Prince Regent's stables. That was what it was built for. Incredible architecture for a stables. And next door to it, he built a riding house. Then, fortunately, 150 years ago, that became a concert hall and there have been performances there since then. We also have a third studio theatre space.

So we have three very flexible spaces that we're presenting year-round events. About 600 events a year annually. That's right across different art forms. Music of all types. Classical, contemporary music. And this morning, our systems nearly collapsed when we put XX on sale. It sold out in about an hour. Dance, theatre, words, comedy festival. We have a big comedy festival next month.

Then alongside that, we're running a big learning, access and participation programme. Also a number of private conference and private-events clients using the space.

If that's not enough, then every year we are also producing and delivering England's biggest mixed-arts, performing-arts festival, Brighton Festival, which happens in May over 23 days. We do commission and produce a number of performances and 250 performances happen in that time.

So lots going on. And for us, lots happening very quickly and disappearing very quickly. So this high turnover of events, and also our spaces being able to accommodate our capacity.

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So what we're going to talk through is actually why live streaming and our planning timetable. What we went through, through this project. As I say, we are still in it. We still feel we're in our pilot phase, because it's been started this year, but we're still in the middle of it. And the Festival was kind of a big step towards it.

How we actually streamed the events, and this is where our partnership with City College really came to the fore and their involvement and experience.

A little bit about what we actually achieved and the numbers and the audiences reached and some of the benefits and then perhaps some of the challenges that we found. Then moving on to what might be our next steps.

So, firstly, why stream?

Well, a bit like Honor actually. When I first came to Brighton in 2004, it's not as long ago as 1988, a very enterprising Brighton company approached us and said, "We'd love to webcast some of your Festival events." We thought that was amazing and they came. They were called Havelina. I think Lars Schuy is still in the laptop, digital-performance arts world. He might be an artist you know.

They came and they streamed a few talks. And it was quite thrilling to be sitting in your bedroom at home watching an event. I was in London. I hadn't moved to Brighton so I couldn't see absolutely everything. And to actually be able to watch that performance. The quality, you know, it wasn't fantastic. But it was still sort of a tantalising glimpse into where this technology was going to go and how accessible it was going to be.

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I think, at the time, the kind of equipment that our audiences were using; the PCs that were around are very different to what they are today. Now streaming is available on iPhones. You can stream from iPhones and obviously you stream to tablets, phones, everything, and large-scale digital-TV screens.

So we really see this as a time of growth and potential. So it was about, for us, audience reach. We weren't fearful. We saw that there was a real capacity, an opportunity to grow the audience.

Enhanced digital engagement was important to us too. Our consumers, our audiences, are becoming more and more hungry to get closer to us and get more involved with us, join in the conversation, feel closer. We had, over recent years, been investing in a radio station and taking audio content of our events to shape into podcasts to show again. But this was losing something. We wanted the live, digital, visual experience as well.

Thirdly, it was the longevity. The fact that these are events that are here today and gone tomorrow. Could we offer an opportunity for our audience to watch again, to stay with us, and to experience again?

Finally, was there a commercial opportunity in it? We have our own commercial trading side where, as I say, we have conferences and events. We've had a number of fantastic conferences as part of the digital festival, which is a great contributor to this month. But some of those clients are really experimenting in live streaming. From Sussex University and others who stream their own events. But others that use the space, would they really welcome the opportunity to stream it, the opportunity to capture their live performance to take away?

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We had to ask ourselves a question. We put our aspirations to the Arts Council. But, as I say, we were not fearful that we were risking losing our live attenders. I was quite surprised at the Arts Marketing Association conference in July, which was at Brighton Dome as well, that there was a debate and a discussion around whether actually live streaming was taking away from actual live attendance.

You'll say I was hedging my bets, because we ultimately streamed sold-out performances. But I don't think we are fearful. We're not fearful that it's about taking away from the live experience. What we're about, I hope, is offering a wider audience reach and an alternative experience. Another way to engage with those artists.

So our steps to streaming. What did we actually do?

Well, first of all, we needed internal buy-in; I think the importance of getting everybody on board. Especially, we didn't have our own digital-media department ready and waiting to be given the green light. "Here's some funding. We can go and now stream."

We needed to pull together all the resources across our organisation. Be that the marketing team, to look at the website, the distribution side, the actual promotion side, through social media. The IT team, the broadband resourcing. Would we actually be able to deliver, from a broadband perspective, the infrastructure? Our technical team. We saw it as an opportunity for them, and we still do, as a way to build training with the organisation in terms of delivering the camera live-feed positions and to work with the team on the event planning. Fourth was the conferencing team. Whether this was a value for, and what was the current experience of, the private-event clients that were currently streaming?

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So in our research phase, we talked to people who we thought might know. We actually thought there were loads of those locally. Because Brighton is a wonderfully creative city and there are lots and lots of artists working with organisations here today, like Lighthouse.

But we also looked to our partners in the region, Glyndebourne, and Jon's mentioned we've also recently met with Martin at The Place at South Hill Park to really find out more about what other arts organisations are doing and how they're delivering their streaming.

But we also started with those local creatives and partners we already had. So those film and video companies in the city that were doing streaming, were hiring equipment, were talking about the options and could help us find our way through the mass of how to pull it together. So we talked to a company called AVT, Fat Sand, who are partners with us, and Fly Creative.

Jon Rose from Fly Creative became so passionate about it that he joined us on the team to help deliver the stream, because he too was interested in exploring live-stream opportunities.

The digital side, our website, we were launching a new website and we're about to launch another one next week. So we had a new festival website. So we talked to They.Create, another Brighton digital agency. We have a media partner with the Guardian. We knew that they were doing exciting things with Glyndebourne. We'll hear about those later, I'm sure. But we were excited to find out if they would be interested in what we were doing and we're having further conversations about the future, about next year, which is exciting.

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But we thought the higher-education departments in the city were going to be invaluable so we had conversations with Sussex University. And then were delighted when an approach to City College sparked the possibility of a partnership and an enthusiasm.

So the first thing we did we had to do a test of the broadband infrastructure and that's what we set about trying to achieve. So our first little steps were to stream the Festival launch, which is an event we host to get people excited. To buy tickets actually.

But actually we found that 200 people viewed the stream and we only announced it two days before. We have a membership scheme and lots of them come to the event. But many can't get to there. So this was a great way that our members could actually get that insight into what the programme was going to be like, ready to book the next day.

This was from a direct link from our homepage on our website. It was the very first day the website had gone live. So it was very tense. But it was exciting to see that the possibility was there.

So we were on our way.

So where we've gone is to really try to come up with a combination of really affordable elements to make our streaming effective, and possible really, for arts organisations with our resources.

We invested in Livestream Pro as our provider. We could look at developing our own player and that is something They.Create had developed for the V&A in fact, but that would be a significant further investment.

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We looked at some of the cameras and we tested those and again, together with City College, we also looked at different vision mixers and production switches. Again, trying to find something that was really affordable.

Finally, we looked to clear the rights. That I think, it comes up at the end again, is one of the biggest challenges about arts, streaming arts performances, is that relationship with the artist and their willingness to be streamed. Be that for live or be that for later download. But we obviously needed a licence.

Then the most important thing was actually how we were going to deliver it. So we reached out to our partners. I'm going to hand over to Jim to talk about actually what happened, what the experience was.

Jim Lee: Okay. I have to apologise. I have the microphone and my analogue notes here – I didn't bring a computer – and my poor eyesight.

So just on a couple levels from the College's point of view, the way we approached the whole project was we'd been streaming our own events for four years now. I think when I started, and what our set up still is at the college, is we have a vision mixer which needs a transit van to move it, it's very big, which connects through a laptop. I think we use RealNetworks for the streaming. But it takes one of our top IT boffins to really ensure that it's a solid stream. So that's where we started.

Obviously, as with all digital technology, it's rapidly developed to the point where we could simply invest in a little box now which would take away a lot of our problems. We could have mobile streaming very easily.

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That's the main limitation we found at work is that people want to use streaming in a different area than where particularly the vision mixer is and it's quite a chore trying to move it around.

When we were approached by the Festival, it was kind of very short notice, wasn't it?

Carol Britten: It was.

Jim Lee: It was pretty much the 11th hour, 59th minute, etc. And it was possibly the worst time of the year for us to do events in May. For us, we're desperately trying to get our students finished. We're nagging them for that last essay, whatever, their assignments.

Also, I particularly work in media and performing arts. We have all our big shows in May as well which all get filmed and streamed. So it was a bit of a challenge.

The technology we ended up using, and which John Rose put together on the mixing and uploading side, we provided three, four or five at one point high-definition Sony cameras shooting in AVC HD, cine signal through HDSDI to the black magic mixer that we talked about earlier.

He had a very complicated set up here. So we had this mixer going into a laptop where he was mixing on to a big high-def monitor. Well, basically an LED screen. Then he had to feed it back into a camera to downgrade it to SD so he could upstream it through another laptop through the bandwidth limitation we had.

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So this is all very much changing now. So this is all becoming much, much easier and cheaper as well. Which is the general experience of digital technology is it democratises everything. Basically it means everyone has much cheaper and easier access to this technology, to the point where it becomes a lot more functional, both in the arts and education.

So from the point of view of the actual events that we filmed, I think we worked on four. Really, for us, from the start, it wasn't really about the streaming form our experience. It was about doing live broadcast and all the skills which the students had to use for live broadcast.

Again, we were limited here by the complete absence of any communication between the mixer and the camera operators. So no ____ or talk back which we've identified as being the most important area for us to improve the experience for the students and their learning.

But obviously from the students' point of view, we mainly had to use part-time students, because, as I said before, the full-time students were all desperately trying to get their courses completed. With part-time courses, it's probably more hit and miss how experienced they are and how good an eye and a technique they have with the cameras.

But in general, the main things was that they found it really enriching, the experience. It was a great experience and it's part of what we've identified it as being basically, in the future, we'll have 16, 17 year old students who maybe haven't done very well at school who will be operating a camera at a live event in a prestigious venue. There's no value you can really put on that. Not a commercial or educational value. That's just an amazing thing for them.

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We find that we have queues of people waiting to do this. So hopefully there will be enough events for them to be able to do it.

But I think from our point of view, with the project with the Festival, we really approach it more from a live-broadcast point of view. But I guess that tells you something about streaming in that we're at the point now where we'll be thinking about doing high-definition broadcast, almost broadcast-quality streaming to the internet which was unthinkable really two years ago even. Even a year ago, it would have been extraordinarily expensive.

I think I've covered everything.

Carol Britten: Brilliant.

So as Jim said, what we did was we streamed actually six events in total. They were all sold-out events. Some of the things we came up against were the last-minute permissions, which meant there was very limited advanced promotions. So there were five talks and debates where we had two or three cameras.

In fact, at the music event that we did, which was live transmission, which Sian mentioned at the beginning, which was our own commissioned and produced piece. Which was the Heritage Orchestra working with Scanner in a reworking of the music of Joy Division.

It was a very popular event. But a huge amount of set up in the concert hall for just one night. So it was fantastic that we were actually able to stream that event live.

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As you said, to test the equipment and to work through perhaps what was a complicated way of delivering the stream. But we were trying to do it as affordably as we could and to test as many options as we could. As Jim says, the next test would be to actually work exclusively in HD.

So on our website we had our media gallery where you could watch the streams. What was great was that we did get permissions to keep those live during the festival from a number of the talks. So fantastically, there was that play again. And we had our account with Livestream Pro where again, that was where the streams were being hosted.

So what were the results?

Well, I'm sharing. I'm sharing everything here. So you can count them down join us in feeling that we were quite pleased.

We had 1,401 streams. That was in the period that we were operating to the end of May. 23,000 minutes. It's interesting, isn't it how people are obviously engaging and interacting. So that was 17 minutes per view, an average of. So very different uses and experiences. Those who were staying with the whole even and clearly those that were dipping in.

But in terms of knowing that it's a new audience, I think that's one of the difficult things of knowing the audience that are watching your stream. We had 104 view from overseas, which is fantastic. And two of the events that Sian mentioned, the Alan de Botton talk, Uses for Religion for Non-Believers and the talk about the music and legacy of Joy Division had actually exceeded the number of attenders in the live event. More people watched it on the stream.

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For the live transmission, we had 90 people watching actually in real time on the day. What's been exciting as a sort of knock on of that, clearly we weren't able to have that playback again, was the ability to actually tape that footage and do something with it. So it has a life, even if it's not about watching the whole event. So as that is our own project, we've produced a trailer of that event. I'll just show you the trailer which shows some of the footage that we filmed on that night.

(Trailer plays)

Jim Lee: I will just say that was quite a challenge filming that. It was very dark most of it. There was very little light happening. Then you set the cameras for very dark, then of course you get a lot of very bright stuff. It was fun.

Carol Britten: Yes. It was a very exciting event and great to have something out of it as well.

So really a little bit about what we felt were the challenges. The talkback, actually it's not on my slide, but that was definitely one. The artists' permissions. The quality of the stream and the different platforms are still a challenge. I think that was again the equipment that we were working with and there are things that we want to test to improve that.

But the creative end and where we can go with that, I think that's the challenge. And the opportunity as well really. Certainly actually being able to work with the artists in advance and actually rehears in advance would be a fantastic step forward for us, for this kind of work.

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Ultimately, really, we want to make this content engaging in a digital context and a digital environment. So that, as I say, it's not replacing the live experience; it's offering another way in. Another way in to really connect with those artists.

So we are really interested in actually what else we can do and it's not just about live streaming the events. It's about additional content and added value that we can perhaps offer to the experience.

The challenge I think is also, yes, actually finding out who exactly are the audiences that are viewing and what they think. But we were really encouraged from our survey and we talked to our audiences about whether they had engaged with the live stream or whether they were aware of it. It was encouraging that 20% of the audience were aware that we were live streaming events this year, even though, obviously, it was a very last-minute promotion. Over 40% said they were generally interested. So we think that's a real testament to the potential of this to grow. And I'm holding on to the fact that, yes, more people watching and seeing it online than actually in the auditorium. It's very exciting.

So what next for us?

Well, as I say, we're continuing to work through our pilot, we feel. So we're going to work again with City College and with John Rose at Fly Creative to stream a couple more events later in the autumn. And potentially we're also interested in looking to not just our live-performance events but also our learning, access and participation programme and whether there's an opportunity there to stream some workshop online.

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We need to do some investing in some equipment now. So now's the time. We've done our research and as Jim says, we think that there's a box that we can now buy that's going to be fantastically helpful and may only cost us £350.

But ultimately, we want to build up this in-house expertise, as well as the students' expertise and experience of working with us. And looking to stream more events next year at festival and increase our views.

Jim Lee: Just a quick note on this box actually. We just found out about it recently.

Livestream, who we have an account with are creating numerous different gadgets, all kinds of stuff, to help people with it. Obviously when you buy these things, you buy into the Livestream account as well. So you can only use it with Livestream. But basically this is a box with a HDMI input and an ethernet output, wireless 3G and 4G in it. So potentially, you can stick it on a camera, wander around in the range of wireless or 4G and be streaming in HD. Obviously at a low-bit rate. But it's an incredible thing. As I said about it becoming cheaper and easier. What was a really tough ask a few years ago, there's now something you can attach to a camcorder and wander around with. All you've got to do is set it up online. Remote activation by your phone. Yes. It's quite a big deal.

Carol Britten: Thank you.

(Applause)

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