

A trickle of live streams on the Web

Brian Stelter

NBC Universal's television coverage of the Winter Olympics in Vancouver this month is exhaustive, as viewers have come to expect.

But its Web coverage, at least when compared with the Summer Games in Beijing 18 months ago, is limited.

NBC's Web site is live-streaming fewer sports than it did in Beijing, marking a step backward in online access to marquee events. The company is making no secret that it would prefer for viewers to watch the Olympics on television, especially in prime time, even though a growing number of people are accustomed to watching TV on the Internet.

On the Web, the only live options this month are hockey and curling; every other event is on the Web equivalent of a tape delay, sometimes of more than a day. Once again, the Olympics have become a laboratory for the future of TV viewing, with NBC controlling the experiments to the chagrin of many viewers.

NBC defends the restrictions by saying that it is maximizing its most important revenue stream, TV, the platform that is preferred by a vast majority of viewers. The network is protecting prime time.

"When we roll out our digital coverage, there are some financial considerations to take into account," said Gary Zenkel, the president of NBC Olympics, in a telephone interview from Vancouver last week.

"We make a massive investment when we acquire and produce the Olympics," Zenkel said. "The lions' share of advertising revenue continues to be generated by our television coverage."

Alan Wurtzel, the president of research for NBC Universal, added, "They have to walk a very fine line between trying to provide as great an experience as possible and making business sense."

For NBC, business sense means trying to ensure that the Web does not cannibalize TV viewing, lest the network fail to meet its ratings guarantees to advertisers. Already, NBC Universal, which is controlled by General Electric and is being sold to Comcast, has said that it expects to lose about \$250 million on the Games.

Compared with previous Winter Games, the company notes, its Web coverage is not shrinking, but is expanding. In Turin, Italy, in 2006, NBC streamed only one hockey game, mostly as a test.

Still, the change from the Games in the summer to the winter is striking. In Beijing, NBC provided 2,200 hours of live streaming, 61 percent of its 3,600 total hours of event coverage across 10 TV networks. In Vancouver, NBC is allowing 400 hours of live streaming, 48 percent of its 830 total hours of coverage. (It has the broadcast rights to live-stream every hour of Olympic action on the Internet, if it chooses.)

NBC's Web site for the games, NBCOlympics.com, does provide every Olympic event on demand in full after it has been shown on TV, though Web users must be subscribers to participating cable or satellite providers.

But that can sometimes be a long wait because NBC is tape-delaying some major events, like the men's downhill last Monday, to feature them in prime time, when it can earn the most

advertising revenue. To some fans, NBC seems caught in a time warp, refusing to acquiesce to the real-time media world; several blogs have campaigned against the restrictions, and on Tuesday the blog Deadspin published the e-mail address for the chairman of NBC Sports and urged people to complain. The company's approach to the Games online highlights how the Web is not nearly as profitable a platform as TV for most major media companies.

"We haven't quite figured out new advertising models for online streaming," said Michael Kelley, a partner in the entertainment and media practice for PricewaterhouseCoopers.

NBC does not seem to be curtailing live streaming because of a lack of advertisers; it sells combined Olympics advertising packages for TV and the Web. It has shown the ability to live-stream sports with as many ads as TV; it streams "Sunday Night Football" that way each week during the N.F.L. season. Rather, the restrictions are in place to drive viewers to TV, "where the dollars are going to be largest, and right now, that's still broadcast," Kelley said.

Other media companies have also tweaked their online streaming strategies in recent months because TV executives are wary of damaging their relationships with traditional distributors.

Through the first five days of the Games, NBC said it had recorded 16.7 million unique visitors to its Olympics site, more than the total during all 17 days of the Turin Games in 2006, when Internet access was less widespread. Perhaps most important, the TV ratings have been strong, easily outpacing those of Turin.

Zenkel said that the online distribution of the Games is a "monumental" effort, calling it "a tremendous amount of work at a tremendous expense."

"Every time we approach an Olympics, the bar gets set higher," he said.

Fonte: New York Times, New York, Feb. 17th 2010, Sports, online.

A utilização deste artigo é exclusiva para fins educacionais.