

The whole world is watching ... by Webcam

OK, maybe not. But the ubiquitous devices make it possible

Sunday, April 13, 2008

By Adrian McCoy

Want to know if traffic going into the Fort Pitt Tunnel is backed up? If the nesting peregrine falcon Dorothy has hatched her new brood in her Cathedral of Learning nest? Or if the house where your teenager is going to a party looks OK?

If you have a computer and a high-speed Internet connection, the answers are at your fingertips. Literally.

Webcams are everywhere, delivering day-and-night video and images to our desktops, from the world's busiest places to the remotest corners of the earth. A colony of penguins in the Antarctic, for example, is as accessible to birdwatchers all over the world (www.martingrund.de/pinguine, October through April) as is Dorothy, the local nesting falcon. A few keystrokes on Google will even take you -- or anyone else -- to your own front yard.

Indeed, if you feel like you're being watched wherever you go, it's probably because you are. This has raised the ire of privacy advocates. Earlier this month, a Franklin Park couple filed a lawsuit against Google for its "Street View" camera shot of their home, charging that it was taken from a private road on their property and was an invasion of their privacy.

Others fear the potential for abuse amid the growing use of surveillance cameras, a trend that has accelerated in this post-9/11 world to combat terrorism and crime. The city, for example, is planning to use video cameras, combined with saturation patrols, to try to improve conditions in neighborhoods that are crime and violence hot spots.

But while some people may feel uncomfortable with the Internet invading their private space, others revel in it.

Justine Ezarik, a 24-year-old Web designer and video editor in Carnegie, has become somewhat famous as a so-called lifecaster, someone who wears or carries video cameras as she goes through her daily routine, allowing the world to see 24/7.

Ms. Ezarik garnered national attention when she had her own channel on the lifecasting Web site Justin.tv. She wore a camera for six months on a near 24-hour-a-day basis, letting viewers watch her at home, work, sleeping, playing World of Warcraft, broadcasting from conventions or going to meetings.

She's cut back some now -- she now lifecasts frequently, not constantly, and has her own site, iJustine (www.ijustine.tv). She uses a Nokia phone that enables her to record and stream video wherever she is, without the need for a computer connection.

Being on camera and online all the time changes everything, Ms. Ezarik says. "You're very aware of it. It takes a big toll, emotionally and physically."

She's careful not to give out personal information that would go online, and asks people who interact with her on camera to be careful about divulging information, such as phone numbers or addresses, since the world -- or part of it, anyway -- could be watching.

She continues to do live appearances on iJustine on a weekly basis, and occasionally pops in to say, "Hi" to people visiting the site. "It's a really powerful tool as far as interacting with people," she says.

To be sure, Webcams have been around for a long time.

The first online camera, aimed at a coffee maker in a computer science lab at England's Cambridge University, was deployed in 1991 and stayed online for 10 years. The oldest one still running is San Francisco's Fogcam (www.fogcam.org), which started in 1994 and is operated through San Francisco State University.

The usefulness of Webcams is hard to ignore, be it making the home, office or roads safer or allowing researchers and consumers to get information they can use from a distance.

A home Webcam, for example, can let people monitor what's happening when they're away, using evolving mobile phone technology. For people looking for traffic information, PennDot posts images taken at key points along I-376, I-279, the Fort Pitt Bridge and elsewhere (www.nb.net/~finals/allcams.htm).

The Pittsburgh Zoo & PPG Aquarium's polar bears and tigers are on screen during daylight and evening hours, respectively, via a KDKA-TV Webcam (kdka.com/pittsburghzoo). That lets keepers monitor the animals from home when necessary, while allowing visitors to connect to the animals more closely, says systems administrator Gary DiPiazza.

Sometimes, popular Webcams show up in the most unusual places, such as one placed in a wooded area of Murrysville that captures a wide range of wildlife, from deer and turkeys to foxes and bears (www.pixcontroller.com/WebCam/WebCam.htm). It was named one of the top 25 most interesting Webcams of 2007 by [EarthCam](http://www.earthcam.com) (www.earthcam.com), a dedicated site that lists and links to Webcams around the planet.

But most Webcams are used in more obvious ways, such as the ones at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History (www.carnegiemnh.org/dinosaurs/cam.htm). Its new Dinosaurs in their Time section can be previewed through videos posted online by several cameras.

Andy Warhol, who made the film "Empire" using a camera recording eight hours worth of the Empire State Building just standing there, probably would have loved that there are now live Webcams in the lobby of The Andy Warhol Museum (www.earthcam.com/usa/pennsylvania/pittsburgh/warhol).

The Pittsburgh Cultural Trust has cameras recording moving images of other Downtown attractions, such the Ninth Street Bridge, Katz Plaza, various Trust venues and the Downtown skyline (www.pgharts.org/webcam). It installed them to showcase growth and development in the Cultural District.

For virtual tourists, Webcams can deliver a preview of places they're going, often accompanied by current weather conditions.

Before heading out, skiers can see what the slopes at Seven Springs look like, using Channel 4's various Webcam weather sites (www.thepittsburghchannel.com/wxcam/949920/detail.html) or one of several statewide ski resort links on the Pennsylvania Tourism Office Web site (www.visitpa.com/visitpa/webcams.pa). Another Webcam link at the state tourism site leads visitors to Punxsutawney, where they can see what groundhog Phil does with his downtime.

A state tourism Webcam mounted on the roof of the Cathedral of Learning gives viewers a bird's-eye view of Oakland, while a second Webcam atop the University of Pittsburgh high-rise, the National Aviary's FalconCam (www.aviary.org/csr/v/webcam_cath.php), keeps trained on the nesting falcons.

The FalconCam informs us not only that Dorothy is pregnant but that her former significant other, Erie, has left the scene, replaced by a younger guy named E2. Another FalconCam is deployed on the Gulf Tower (www.aviary.org/csr/v/webcam_gulf.php), where Tasha 2 and Louie are also getting ready to raise a new family.