

Lessons in Live streaming from National Theatre Wales



Katie Moffat and Katherine Jewkes, Digital Associate at National Theatre Wales



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Background

There can be few individuals in the western world unfamiliar with the name Bradley Manning, the young US soldier who was convicted of releasing the largest set of classified documents ever leaked to the public. What is less well known is that Bradley Manning spent his early years in west Wales. The question of what might have led him to take the path he did is one tackled by National Theatre Wales' (NTW) production *The Radicalisation of Bradley Manning*, which toured around Wales before appearing at the 2013 Edinburgh Fringe.

Early on in the production process the decision was taken to live stream each performance. It was, says Katherine Jewkes, Digital Associate at NTW, a logical decision: "The story itself is such a digital one that it made complete sense for the production to have a digital life." Katherine is also clear that the rationale behind the live streaming was essentially a creative choice rather than a marketing one, she explained, "With live streaming we always ask, how can we make it a worthwhile and engaging experience for the viewer? If you do that then, in our experience, it will reach that wider audience that you might be looking for."

Process

Initially NTW worked with a series of partners to help with the technical setup of the live stream but by the time the show went up to the Edinburgh Fringe, the team at NTW were fully controlling it themselves. NTW bought the cameras, video encoder and mixers, which means they will also have the technical capability to live stream future productions should they wish. They used Livestream.com to broadcast.

Katherine explained how what they had learnt during the first performances of *The Radicalisation of Bradley Manning* meant they were able to make some improvements to the live stream of the Fringe production, "We went from SD quality cameras to HD quality and whereas originally the live stream was only a desktop experience, for Edinburgh it was also viewable on mobiles and tablets. It transpired subsequently that over 20% of our viewers were watching on mobile."

There was a chat function within the live stream that allowed viewers to comment on and discuss the production. There were also guest 'hosts' on the live stream chat who facilitated the discussion each night, adding their unique perspective on the show. Alexa O'Brien, the journalist who provided an extensive archive of the only available transcripts of Manning's closed trial, hosted the most popular night. TROBM's Writer, Tim Price, joined her on the chat.

We also used the new livestream.com 'feed' feature as a links system, it worked like a Facebook page in that we were able to post links to background information and source material about Bradley's life which the audience could then read and share with their networks as the show was live. From our stats, we could see that this is a popular feature of the experience, with 70% of viewers clicking through to the links.

All three features of the live stream (live feed, chat and links system) were embeddable as a complete package onto other sites, which NTW took advantage of. In order to take the live stream to a potentially wider audience, the entire broadcast was embedded on NTW's Facebook page, their online community and on a separate night, on the Huffington Post website.

Outcome

Over 6,500 audience members watched the Bradley Manning live stream from 1,269 cities in 103 countries. 56% of the audience were based in the UK, while other considerable audience bases could be found the US, Germany, Japan, Canada, Ireland, Netherlands and Australia.

When watching the real time stats, the team could see that there was an audience member in Portland (US) watching at the same time as someone in Port Talbot (Wales).

20% of the audience watched on mobile or tablet devices, on a variety of over 60 devices. From feedback on the chat, they also discovered that one audience member in Australia was watching while on a bus!

During the three weeks of streaming to Livestream.com, NTW built up a new network of nearly 4,000 followers on the platform (this was the first time they'd used the site).

Recommendations and key points for effective practice from Katherine Jewkes

1. Archive your process. Draw up detailed schematics of how you delivered your live stream, what plugs into what, how much each bit costs, who your providers were and what your system design looks like. We made the equivalent of a show bible for the live stream of Bradley Manning, which had all the cues plotted onto the script alongside the other stage management notes. Aside from it being a good record of what we did, when we come to do another live stream it made it much more straightforward.

2. The entrances and exits for your online audience might be different to what you'd like them to be, they may not start watching at the start of the stream and they may not keep watching through to the end. Think about what mechanisms you can put in place to make the audience experience more pleasant, so that they stay engaged with the live stream. There are lots of distractions in an online space, so build that into the online story design.
3. Take inspiration from outside the Arts sector. When you look at other industries, live streaming is a solved problem. Within online gaming for example, twitch.tv are regularly streaming games of Minecraft, and both PS4 and XBone have hardware built into the console in order to allow players to share their games online. As well as regular spectator style events, it allows small groups of players the ability to feedback into a live game, creating a unique environment between broadcaster and audience. At the other end of the scale, a single camera 24 hour live stream of kittens playing together (<http://new.livestream.com/FosterKittenCam>) proves to be one of the most popular channels on Livestream.com with over 38,000 followers and one of the highest engagement rates of the platform. Live streaming is just one part of the digital language of these sectors, and a proven way to engage audiences with their work.

More information:

<http://nationaltheatrewales.org/bradleymanning>

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