HAS IT EVER OCCURRED TO YOU TO SEE WHAT IS HAPPENING IN ANOTHER PART OF THE GLOBE RIGHT NOW? WEBCAMS CAN TAKE YOU ‘VIRTUALLY’ THERE, OFFERING WINDOWS ON A SHRINKING WORLD

Virt any popular tourist attraction, anyone, and there is a very good chance that at some point your image will be transmitted live to potentially millions of viewers on the web, via a nearby camera linked up to the internet. And this ‘webcam’ phenomenon is by no means confined to tourist sites. More and more public spaces, of all types, are being wired into the internet audience. Webcams are also being set up in homes, offices and other formerly private spaces, for a myriad of reasons. The rise of webcams can be traced back to 1991, to a networked video camera installed by some computer scientists, at the University of Cambridge, in the UK.

Installed by some computer scientists, the camera was intended as a timesaver for the stressed-out academics in the building who could check the status of the coffee pot, on their own computer screen, before ascending several flights of stairs for their drink. Years later, the coffee pot has become a worldwide celebrity as images of the pot are beamed over the web (www.cl.cam.ac.uk/cgi-bin/vaccoffee).

What began as a functional timesaver in Cambridge has, in just a decade, become a major medium for communication and observation. The ease with which people can now set up their own webcams (digital color cameras started at around US$50, and the software can be downloaded free or at a small voluntary cost) has greatly expanded their use. There are almost as many reasons for webcams as there are censAMES themselves, but their main applications include:

- ENTERTAINMENT – perhaps the most popular use for a webcam, the opportunities for entertainment are almost endless. You could begin by exploring the world, visiting those places that you have always longed to see (try the pathways 20-stop world tour, right). There is nothing quite like seeing a real-time image of the River Danube followed, in the space of a few seconds, with a live view of an Indian Ocean sunset. Alternatively, you could watch your favorite singer perform in a live broadcast from the other side of the world. Or you may decide to switch light bulbs on and off in Gifu, Japan, as part of an art project (http://lightsoft.opia.pref.gifu.jp/LONgExp.exe?onoff=22). Or try your hand at ghost-hunting, looking for the White Lady of Oradwell Hall, in Salford, England (http://www.oradwell.hall.org.uk/ghostcam – weekends only).

- FUNCTIONALITY – helping ensure that a trip to the coffee machine is worthwhile while only one of many functional uses of a webcam. Set up a live cam in your weekend home and have the security of being able to keep an eye on it during the week, or point a cam at your children and babysitter to watch from your office. With new wireless technology you will even be able to see the children at home while driving and dining. The many webcams covering major roads and junctions can also help you avoid traffic jams.

- COMMUNITY – haven’t seen your Aunt Beatrice in Uzbekistan in a long time?

No need to send a video, just set up a webcam to show how the children have grown. Throwing a party? Set up a webcam and a cast of web surfers (perhaps friends in faraway places) can join in.

FACILITATING CULTURAL TOLERANCE

Those Cambridge coffee drinkers could not have anticipated the far-reaching impacts on society when they installed their camera in the lab. The extraordin-

arya proliferation of webcams worldwide is, I believe, facilitating cultural tolerance, helping us learn a great deal about other people and other places just by watching them. Crucially, the effect on the people or culture being observed is negligible – the passive webcam does not harm cultural diversity. The ongoing expansion of webcams into more and more locations does raise important issues about privacy. If you set up your own webcam, it is possible to restrict access to the images by hav-

ing the web page password-protected. Only Aunt Beatrice, not the entire world, need see how the children have grown. We have no control, however, over the webcams of others. Few people would have any problem being observed using the pedestrian crossing at a busy junc-

tion that happens to be the location of a ‘traffic jam-cam’, but where does it all end? These issues remain unresolved, but it is revealing that a nation as con-

cerned with privacy as the US has enthus-

iastically embraced the webcam cul-

ture. This suggests that societal percep-

tions of privacy and civil liberty are beginning to change. Sheriff Joe Arpaio, who has installed webcams in Maricopa County Jail, Phoenix, (www.crime.com/

info/jailcam/jailcam_pop.html – see image, far left) may be right to believe that virtual visits to his jail will deter crime. For now, with webcams clearly here to stay, why not take a look around?

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