The price of connection

Information Technology sees Webcasting as a way of the future, but the logistics of watching events via computer are uncertain

By Rachel Rosmarin
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They were some of the biggest events at Northwestern of the last year and a half: author Scott Turow’s 2001 commencement speech, University President Henry Bienen's 2002 State of the University addresses, the March 2002 stem cell and human genome project symposiums, the 2002 MLK Day address by the Rev. Samuel Kyles, Dance Marathon 2002.

They were all hyped for months. They were all held in huge auditoriums.

And thanks to NU Information Technology's Webcasting technology, you didn't have to be there to enjoy them.

Webcasting’s perks are clear. When Pick-Staiger Concert Hall's 1,000 seats filled up for the keynote Martin Luther King Jr. Day address in 2001, people across campus had the chance to watch through their computers.

Joe Hoy, media services architect for IT Academic Technologies, said NU’s response to Webcasts since then is increasingly encouraging.

“We’re hoping it will be huge,” he said. “This is a distribution channel to a large number of people, and it’s useful.... I’d like to see us start doing one Webcast a month.”

Still, some professors and administrators are concerned about the larger consequences of opening NU events to the Internet.

How does NUIT do it?

To produce a Webcast, NUIT must make sure the venue is outfitted with the proper technology for a high-speed connection to the university network. There are eight Webcast-ready locations, including Ryan Auditorium in the Technological Institute, Annie May Swift Hall Auditorium, Coon Forum and Harris Hall 107.

NUIT brings in up to four cameras, depending upon the needs of the event, and brings encoding equipment to put the camera feed directly onto the Internet.

The Webcasting service isn’t cheap. A half-day event with one camera costs about $1,038, while a full-day event with four cameras can cost up to $6,373.

If the costs are too much for a client, NUIT gives the option of having the event taped and then stored as streaming media on the NUIT Web site in an archive.
To watch a Webcast, the computer must have either Windows Media player or Real Player installed. NUIT usually encodes each Webcast in both formats with high and low bandwidth versions.

Windows Media and Real Player host NUIT’s Webcasts on their streaming media servers, but both servers limit how many people can watch a Webcast at one time. Windows only provides for 100 viewers, but Hoy said that if NUIT beefed up its network machines, more could watch through the Windows player. Real Player supports 200 viewers, though Hoy said a deal could be negotiated with the company to secure more server space.

“Right now, we have a total of 300 being able to watch at once – that’s the limit,” he said. “But so far we haven’t exceeded that number at any Webcast.”

The Webcast of April’s stem cell symposium had 200 people watching from computers and Bienen’s university address drew 250.

“We’d like to increase that number,” Hoy said. “We’re doing a good job serving the university, but we need to go further into commodity Internet, which is providing content on the Web to anyone, not just to people in the NU community.”

Are they watching?

NUIT publicizes upcoming Webcasts on the university Web site but Hoy said the organization sponsoring the Webcast often wants to downplay the “watch-from-home” option because they want better attendance at the live venue.

“The stem cell symposium - they weren’t really advertising because they were really trying to get people to come into that theater to hear the speakers,” Hoy said.

NUIT conducted an informal poll on its Web site in April, asking "Have you ever watched a live NU Webcast from your computer?"

The results were 60 percent no and 40 percent yes, according to Wendy Woodward-King, associate director of technology support services.

“We are working to draw more attention to Webcasting because it’s so effective in broadcasting information,” Woodward-King said. “The results of this poll won’t impact a decision involving financial resources yet – it’s just kind of a weak data point because we don’t know who responded, if it was students or teachers.”

“Mostly we have used Webcasting (more) for research and administration-type events than for student events. Officially it is a faculty and staff service,” she said. “But really, anyone who has the right equipment could plug it into a port.”

“Webcasting is a developing technology,” Woodward-King said. “We are making improvements constantly, and this sets us apart and makes us competitive with other technologically driven universities.”

classes@dormroom.edu

The potential academic uses for Webcasts have sparked debate among different sectors of the NU community.
Some students, such as Krupin, can imagine practical uses for Webcasting in certain large, lecture-oriented classes, such as Introduction to Sociology - a class that traditionally enrolls more than 600 students.

“If a class that big, where you don’t really ask questions and all you are doing is writing, had some lectures broadcast or saved online, I wouldn’t see anything wrong with it,” Krupin said.

Sociology Prof. Charles Moskos, who regularly teaches the class, said allowing students to view his lectures online would ruin the unique atmosphere that comes from attending his large class.

“The point of my lectures is the interaction,” he said. “I ask questions and take hand surveys, and I pick on individuals. There is a chemistry you get from a large class you would never get from a Web site-type environment. In my class we grow and laugh together.”

A self-described Luddite, after the early 19th century anti-technology movement, Moskos said students would be denying themselves a high-quality education if they elected to watch lectures online.

“If students are paying this much money to come to Northwestern, and they watch (lectures online), they are cheating themselves out of the true college experience, which is a professor and classroom with other intelligent students,” Moskos says.

Though Hoy said he has never had a request from a professor to archive or Webcast a class lecture, he speculates that at some point professors might want to store certain lectures on the Internet.

“It may come that we could archive the canned stuff - the stuff that a teacher has been giving over and over every year,” he said. “But for now, well, I think students on this campus should count on going to class. Watching streaming media is just like watching TV - there is no opportunity to ask questions. But that too may come.”

Hoy envisions an instant chat program like the one NUIT oversaw during Bienen’s university address. Students on the Evanston campus could send in a question to a laptop on the stage where Bienen spoke on the Chicago campus.

“This was great for students who couldn’t get down there. They could still ask those questions,” Hoy said.

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