

▶ How Live commentary helped PBS NewsHour drive engagement and growth

INTRO

YouTube introduced GNI YouTube Innovation Funding to help news organizations test and learn their way to success and build sustainable digital video operations. PBS NewsHour is a video-centric public media news broadcaster with a nightly hour-long TV show and a robust digital footprint across the web and social media.

PBS NewsHour uses YouTube to provide audiences with hours of uninterrupted live streams for major events, expert on-the-spot analysis, complete television broadcasts, and news clips to add context to broadcasts.

But keeping up with growing audience demands is challenging, especially as people become increasingly hungry for more digital-first content. YouTube has over 2B monthly logged-in users — and that number is going up. To deliver to this growing digital-first audience, PBS NewsHour needed to keep evolving its digital journalism.

The GNI YouTube Innovation Funding program helped the PBS NewsHour team lay the foundation for future digital video innovation by improving technology infrastructure and streamlining workflows. It also gave them the opportunity to experiment with new ways of engaging audiences and driving brand growth through one of YouTube’s newer audience engagement tools, Live commentary.

What is Live commentary?

This YouTube beta feature enables brands to choose who can post in a live chat. Rather than being open to the general public, moderators give comment access to select YouTube accounts (e.g., journalists, experts), which ensures a high-quality, rewarding, and positive audience experience.

The PBS NewsHour team used the tool to cover two of the biggest political events of 2019: The Impeachment hearings in November and the PBS NewsHour POLITICO Democratic Debate in December. By doing this, PBS NewsHour was one of the first major broadcasters to integrate Live commentary into a major live stream event.

Because of its investment in audience engagement, PBS NewsHour has driven significant growth for its YouTube channel. By the end of 2019, it had seen almost **60% year-on-year growth in subscriber numbers, with total subscribers surpassing 1.5M.**

Live commentary helps PBS NewsHour better manage audience engagement

Live chat has the potential to deepen audience engagement through robust and healthy conversations. But one of the biggest challenges for brands is actively managing live chat, particularly when you’re trying to deal with participants who may compromise the integrity of the conversation.

For this reason, PBS NewsHour was wary of experimenting extensively with the live chat or Community features on its YouTube channel, and typically disabled live chat when it hosted live streams. But the team saw huge potential in those spaces to more deeply connect with their audience, and believed Live commentary could be the solution — **they could foster better, longer-lasting exchanges through real-time commentary by journalists and other experts, without having to engage disruptors.**

One of the first times the team experimented with the tool was during the Impeachment hearings. They assigned an engagement editor and a senior editor to manage the chat and provide context to viewers, and increased the responsibilities of the producers outside the digital video team to ensure things ran smoothly. The test helped them propel civic discourse and information sharing in a way that added meaningful value for their audiences.

They expanded the use of Live commentary a month later, during the PBS NewsHour POLITICO Democratic Debate. This was a high profile event, so they embedded the Live commentary window into the PBS NewsHour website. The results were phenomenal.

The debate had nearly 230K peak concurrent viewers and over 500K hours of live watch time.

Your step-by-step guide to getting started with Live commentary

The PBS NewsHour team invests significant time and resources to get Live commentary working harder for them. They start planning how to integrate it into live events days or even weeks in advance by prepping journalists and collecting audience questions. The day of, they start their live event a couple of hours before the main attraction with an engaging pre-show. During that time — and then following the live event — they use Live commentary for journalists and other subject matter experts to provide analysis and context.

But what if you don't have those same resources? Don't worry — Live commentary doesn't have to be a huge lift. In fact, it can be a simple and extremely effective way to differentiate your content and more deeply engage your audience. Below, we outline some simple steps you can take to get the most out of Live commentary.

1. Reach out to your audience via Community posts

Lean into your engaged audience via YouTube's Community features ahead of time, as you start to prepare for your live stream event. Weeks, days, or hours before the event, you can ask them what sort of topics or subjects they're most interested in hearing about and get them to post questions they would like answered during the live stream. You can also use a Live commentary chat message to link to a recent Community post, and tell viewers to ask questions there, with moderators collating those questions as they're posted, in real time.

2. Embed Live commentary into your owned and operated (O&O) platforms

If you're already embedding the live stream on your O&O, go the extra mile and embed the Live commentary window as well — users watching the stream on your site can get the full experience.

3. Record a pre-show in advance

Going 'live' several hours before the event start time helps attract and engage viewers — as an example, PBS NewsHour went live nearly five hours before the Democratic debate started. But that doesn't mean your whole pre-show needs to be live. Pre-recording or repackaging existing content for some or all of your pre-show means you can invest energy in the real-time audience experience, including Live commentary.

4. Incorporate Live commentary into your live stream

Go into the live stream with a detailed 'chat script' (based on audience and expert questions) so you have a baseline of material. During the live stream, also draw on the expertise of your journalists. For example, during politics streams PBS NewsHour features questions and messages from NewsHour producers such as Rachel Wellfor and Mike Melia. This helps stimulate an informed, robust discussion and bring audience and media personalities closer together.

Interested in Live commentary?

Speak to your YouTube point of contact today

Live commentary is still a beta feature, so it's not yet available to all YouTube channels. But if this sounds like something you're interested in, reach out to your YouTube contact to see about getting Live commentary enabled on your channel today.