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Many organizations are now using live streaming to market, sell, support, evangelize, and in some cases, deliver their products or services. In this buyer's guide, I'll review the features offered by live streaming service providers in different categories, and factors to consider when choosing a service.Before digging in, let's distinguish live streaming via services like YouTube or Facebook Live and real-time conferencing like that offered by services like Skype for Business or Zoom. Live streaming is a one-to-many video experience with some interactivity via Q&A and chat. Live streaming is what broadcasters use to deliver video over the internet and the experience offers the same quality as television, if not higher, plus features like captions, advertising insertion, and encryption.In contrast, conferencing is a many-to-many experience with more interactivity but lower video quality. You use live streaming to broadcast to a handful or millions of viewers. You use conferencing to interact with a handful to a few dozen. This article covers live streaming and not conferencing.Audio + Video + IT. Our editors are experts in integrating audio/video and IT. Get daily insights, news, and professional networking. Subscribe to Pro AV TodaySocial media has undeniable appeal and as platforms, Facebook and YouTube are undeniably robust. But using them as your primary streaming platform for mission-critical events is problematic for multiple reasons, most importantly the lack of accessible technical support. Most of the live streaming platforms discussed below can syndicate streams to various social media platform, so originating your streams with a commercial service is the best strategy.Figure 1. Publishing to social media is a critical function for most live streamers, and most services, like Vimeo, make it simple. (Image credit: Facebook)Best PTZ cameras for live streaming (Image credit: 1 Beyond)Basic Live Streaming PlatformsLet's cover the features offered by the widest swath of live streaming service providers. By way of background, with most services, you send a single encoded stream from your event to the vendor's site, where it's transcoded into an encoding ladder and distributed to your viewers by the service, either to the service's video player or your own. What you're paying for is access to the platform, transcoding services, and for distribution of your video, which is the primary variable cost.You should be able to originate the stream from any capture device that supports RTMP output which virtually all do. You should be able to display the video on your own website, on a viewing page on the service, as well as syndicate to other platforms, including social media. After the event concludes the system will typically convert the stream to VOD for download or viewing on the service.Most basic services offer multiple plans, some monthly, some event-based. Figure 2 shows the price list for DaCast which also offers event pricing. As you can see, the primary differentiator is bandwidth, viewer hours, and cost for additional bandwidth which drops substantially with your commit level.Figure 2. DaCast pricing plan. (Image credit: DaCast)What features should you look for? Here's a quick summary:Pricing is obviously a major concern. Make sure you understand what happens if your event runs longer than you expect, if the audience is larger, or any combination thereof that makes you exceed the hours or bandwidth of the selected commitment level.Companies to consider: Boxcast, DaCast, Streamshark, Vimeo, Wowza Streaming Cloud.Niche Streaming PlatformsThe platforms listed above are great for general-purpose broadcasts, but if you're working in a niche, you may want to consider niche-specific platforms that offer features critical for your target audience. Houses of worship are a great example. In addition to many of the features listed above, worship-specific services offer features like interactive Bible resources, moderated chat, and options to collect donations that may not be available in general-purpose services. Services to consider include StreamingChurch.tv, SermonCast, Streaming Video Provider, Sunday Streams (now owned by Boxcast), ChurchStreaming.tv, and Worship Channels (thanks for Epiphany for compiling this list).There are also similar services for high-school sports (MascofMedia, NFHS, Meridix) which offer sports-specific features not available on most general platforms. If you're in a niche check if there are services that cater to that niche or find a general-purpose service with features essential to your niche. For example, Boxcast supports a scoreboard feature in their service.Video Development PlatformsSome organizations want to go beyond simple live streaming and playback; they want to integrate live streaming into an application on their website, whether online shopping, gambling, auctioning, or the like. While most live streaming services have APIs that allow programmatic control over most functions, for deep integration, you need extensive developer tools beyond the API, like SDKs for commonly used programming languages like Java and Ruby, code samples, and access to affordable consulting services. For gambling and auctioning you also need access to low-latency HLS or DASH.Figure 3. Wowza is tough to beat for companies integrating video into an application. (Image credit: Wowza)Wowza has a distinct advantage here with the Wowza Streaming Cloud, which is a GUI-based implementation of the Wowza Streaming Engine, an exceptionally powerful and flexible product that powers several other live streaming service providers. If you need to input or output to a particular format, chances are that Wowza Streaming Engine already supports it, and Wowza recently debuted a professional services arm to speed these integrations.Companies to consider: Brightcove, JWPlayer, Kaltura, Wowza Streaming Cloud.Enterprise Platforms for Live and On Demand Videos (VOD)Many organizations deploy both live and VOD video, including videos converted from live events. In these cases, it makes sense to find a single service that can satisfy both your live and VOD requirements and make them all work within the firewall.This means many of the features described above but also access to single-sign-on for users, the ability to access enterprise CDN functionality to efficiently deliver the video inside the firewall, and the ability to run multiple live events simultaneously. You may also want webinar-like features like polling, chat, and live Q&A and lead generation features like the ability to request an email address from a viewer or insert a call to action.Figure 4. Vimeo's enterprise-oriented offering includes live streaming with multiple additional functions. (Image credit: Vimeo)VOD functionality can go even deeper. Are you looking for:• Simple YouTube-like storage and playback of live to VOD and other videos.• The ability to create multiple levels of contributors (admin, moderator, contributor) with different sets of rights and capabilities.• The ability to create a portal, or portals by the company or division, with moderated channels and review and approval workflows.• A training portal that can track and supply user-level statistics for on-boarding and regulatory compliance.All of these are possible depending upon the company and the application. This category involves some of those listed previously but also opens a variety of other solutions of which live streaming is a feature as opposed to the primary service. Ease of use is critical here, since so much of the functionality will be used by employees rather than technicians. So, be sure you can test the system extensively before you select it.Companies to consider: Brightcove, DaCast, IBM Video Streaming, Kaltura, Microsoft Stream, MediaPlatform, Panopto, Qumu, Vidizmo, Vimeo.Specialty Features for MarketingIf you're using video for marketing your supplier needs to provide webinar-like functionality from registration through to data integration into marketing engines like Eloqua, Marketo, and Hubspot. During live events, you'll want a complete toolset for maintaining viewer interest and prospect scoring including polling, quizzes, chat and similar tools. For other live streams and VOD videos you'll need the ability to capture email addresses from interested viewers, plus the ability to easily insert calls to action.Figure 5. JWPlayer's recommendation engine helps keep viewers engaged. (Image credit: JWPlayer)Advanced features include the ability to create viewer-specific playlists powered by a recommendation engine. For sites mixing blog or article and video content, a feature like article matching, which suggests videos to display in an article by matching the article title to video metadata, can help increase the number of contextually useful views of your video content. Depending on your audience and aspirations, geographical reach may be critical here. So, if you're looking to take your brand global, make sure your candidate service providers can supply that in all key markets.Services for Regional and National BroadcastersHere, concerns switch from simple live streaming to integrating live into a potentially 24/7 multi-channel structure with minimal coding required. You need true, studio-level DRM plus server-side advertising insertion that's proven to work at scale. You need full support for captions on all viewing platforms for the live event and the subsequent VOD streams. You need the ability to deliver to more devices and platforms whether via APIs or SDKs, and a scalable low-latency solution for HLS and DASH.Also check on the availability of HEVC/HDR support both for smart TVs and Apple devices. While you may pay a small premium for encoding and storage, HEVC should deliver substantial bandwidth savings.Figure 6. Brightcove deploys SSIA to defeat ad blockers. (Image credit: Brightcove)To match the television viewing experience you'll need 4K and HDR support and cloud-DVR functionality, plus the ability to deliver TV Everywhere. To maximize marketing, you'll need the ability to create and publish clips to social media while the event is still ongoing.To maximize engagement, look for a robust recommendation engine with playlists and next-up previews, plus the ability to integrate data with third party packages like Google Analytics, Nielsen, and Comscore. To maximize QoE, you'll need the ability to integrate analytics with services like Conviva, Nice People at Work, and Mux.A lot of service providers have these capabilities in their features tables but you need the proven ability to deliver at scale. Your best bet here is to study the customer lists of the candidate companies as well as the features tables and find companies serving others in the market with needs and scale similar to yours.Companies to consider: Brightcove, iStreamPlanet, JWPlayer Ultra Large Event BroadcastingIf you're producing events this large you're probably not scanning the Internet looking for buyer's guides like this one. For the sake of completion, however, I'll note that those producing these types of events need proven ability to deliver at scale over a broad geographical area, which typically requires more than one CDN. For this reason, at this scale, it's worth talking directly to relevant CDNs who typically have the media transcoding and packaging expertise to produce the media, and whose distribution costs represent the vast bulk of the overall expense of the event. Whoever the supplier, you'll be looking for advanced features like a network operating center (NOC) staffed 24/7 plus robust QoE and QoS tools.Companies to consider: Akamai, iStreamPlanet, Limelight.Understanding the different classes of service providers, and the features that their services offer, will hopefully accelerate your search and help you choose the optimal service provider. Whether you're looking for a way to catch the big game this weekend when you're away from your living room, or you just like to catch live television when you're trapped somewhere without either cable or a television, you have plenty of options to help you catch a broadcast on your mobile phone or your computer. Here's a look at five of the best ways to tune in when you're on the go. Earlier in the week we asked how you tune into live television that you're subscribed to on your mobile device or when you're not in front of the big screen. You responded, and now we're back to take a look at the top five, based on your nominations. The Super Bowl is this weekend, but not all of us have the privilege of making some snacks and...Read morePhoto by IK's World Trip.G/O Media may get a commissionBuy for \$43 at StackSocialOrb/Orb LiveWhen you need to stream audio or video around the house, to your mobile device, or across the globe when you're away from home, Orb can certainly deliver. We mentioned Orb several times, and it's still a great way to stream your media from your computer to other devices in your home, or, if you're willing to pay for an Orb appliance to connect to your cable box or HTPC, stream live TV or recorded TV to any other device on or off of your home network. Orb supports video up to 720p, and gives you the flexibility to watch live sports, prime time TV shows, or anything else that's currently airing in your living room on your mobile phone, tablet, or laptop over Wi-Fi, 3G, or 4G when you can't be in the living room to enjoy it. Pricing varies depending on whether you need hardware (between \$79-\$99 for the set-top box) to connect to your TV and home network, or you already have a TV tuner in your HTPC (the Orb Live and Orb Caster software are both free, but the mobile apps are \$9.99.)Windows/Mac only: Free application Orb lets you access music, video, and other media stored on your Read moreSlingboxWhere other live TV streaming solutions offer complexity, Slingbox offers elegant simplicity. The Slingbox from Sling Media is a set-top box that connects to your TV and your cable or satellite receiver that makes it easy for you to effectively log in to your TV at home and watch live TV on your computer or mobile device as though you were sitting in front of your TV. You can change channels, browse TV listings, and even set your home DVR to record TV that you won't make it home in time to watch. The Slingbox comes in two flavors, the Slingbox Solo and the Slingbox Pro-HD (which predictably supports HD and additional devices connected to it) and will set you back \$179.99 to \$299.99 (not including extended support options). You'll also need to drop \$29.99 for the SlingPlayer app to control your Slingbox from your smartphone or tablet, but the price buys you one of the most feature-rich and hassle-free live TV streaming solutions on the market.EyeTVElgato's EyeTV line of TV tuners and live TV software were, for a long time, the only option for Mac users who were looking for an easy way to use their Macs as TV tuners or HTPCs. They're not the only options anymore, but they're certainly one of the best, and if you plug a TV source in to an EyeTV and then the EyeTV into your Mac via USB, you want watch live TV right there on your computer screen. Combine an EyeTV tuner or DVR with the EyeTV app on your mobile device, and you can stream live or pre-recorded TV on your mobile device when you're out of the house. The EyeTV app will set you back \$4.99 in the iTunes App Store for any iOS device, and the tuners vary in price from \$99 to \$199 depending on whether you need aDTV tuner, a DTV and HD tuner, a tuner with a DVR inside, or a Wi-Fi enabled tuner that can wirelessly stream TV to other devices in your home.Vulkano Flow BoxThe Vulkano Flow may not be one of the most well known set-top tuners on the market, but it's definitely one of the most powerful. For \$99.99, the Vulkano Flow is an easy to install and set up device that connects to your cable or satellite tuner, supports HD video, and your home network to allow you to wirelessly watch live TV on your iOS or Android device on your home network or when you're away via 3G or 4G. You get complete control over your home TV, so you can switch channels, browse a built-in programming guide (that you don't have to pay extra to view), and even connect to other video inputs like a DVR or HTPC and control that as well. Vulkano offers desktop players for Mac OS and Windows (Free), and mobile players for iOS, Android, and BlackBerry (\$12.99.)Hauppauge WinTVVHauppage is an old name in TV tuners, and the company is still going strong by offering a range of products to HTPC enthusiasts who want to build their own devices to stream, save, and watch live and recorded television and to people who would rather buy a set-top box to handle the streaming for them. Those of you who nominated the WinTV mentioned that you can easily install a WinTV tuner in your HTPC and download the WinTV application on your HTPC and iOS or Android device to stream TV from your HTPC to your device. Pricing varies depending on which tuner you'd like, whether you want HD video, and whether you want an internal or USB tuner to install at all or you'd just prefer a set-top box like the Hauppauge Broadway (\$199), but the WinTV Extend app you'll need to stream from your Tuner will set you back \$9.95, and the mobile apps are free (although they only support Wi-Fi.)Now that you've seen the top five, it's time to put them to an all out vote for the winner.Honorable mentions this week go out to streaming TV sites like Justin.tv, which many of you said you use to stream your own TV shows to the web so you can catch them when you're away from home, and to The NFL's website, which many of you noted is indeed streaming the big game on their own. Finally, since we mentioned that the Department of Homeland Security had shut down FirstRowSports' primary domain, many of you made note of the fact that the site is still up and running on a different URL.Have a favorite method that didn't get the nominations needed to make the top five? Want to make a case for it, or for your favorite of the nominees above? Sound off in the comments below.

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