



Open House

I chatted a bit in last week's story about using the internet video telephone software, Skype. But this isn't the only method I use to visually communicate with people overseas. I also have a video camera positioned above my workbench, and most days this is turned on for at least a few hours, and people anywhere in the world can 'tune in' and watch the work in progress.

Back when I first set this up over ten years ago, the Woodblock Webcam did not offer smooth video, but merely a static snapshot refreshed every ten seconds or so, as my internet connection back in those days was a very slow dial-up type.

These days though, I have a very fast optical fibre connection, so video is no problem, and because I also use an internet broadcast service, many people can watch simultaneously. I think the most who have ever tuned in at the same time was when I did a live presentation - a webcast - together with illustrator Jed Henry, and we had hundreds of viewers. Most days though, I attract no more than a half-dozen people who drop by to watch for a while.

Knowing that people are watching does affect our conversations in the workshop. The other day when I was talking to some of the staff about issues we have been having with our printing paper, I got a bit too vivid in my description of the problems, and one of them gestured towards the hovering camera, to remind me to temper my words. Who knows who might be watching ...

But I think that's a 'feature' not a bug. Speaking impolitely about others, even - especially - when they are not present, is not a good practice, and it is not a bad thing to be reminded of this from time to time.

Roughly speaking, it seems that there are two kinds of people who visit our webcam: people with a general interest in our work, who are simply keeping in touch with our current progress, and people who themselves are trying printmaking, who are watching with the intent of picking up techniques to use in their own work.

This latter group also helps keep me 'honest'. Knowing that I am a model stops me from taking shortcuts or working roughly, and I am sure that the number of errors and 'chips' in my work has decreased since I began working under this kind of oversight. This has the downside that viewers never have a chance to learn how to repair the mistakes, but I'm sure they get lots of practice on their own, just as I did many years ago ...

I mentioned that viewers fall into two general categories, but I learned the other day that there might be a third group. My broadcast software shows me how many people are watching, so I can tell when they come and go. I was working on one of my blocks, listening to the BBC radio in the background at the same time, as I usually do, and five people were on the webcam. When the particular radio program came to an end I turned off the radio to work in peace and quiet for a while. Within a space of less than a minute, the number of webcam viewers dropped from five to one.

I see. They were only watching my webcam for the purpose of listening to that radio program; once it finished, off they went! Perhaps this tells me I need a new business model!

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