

Cut off because of coronavirus? Connect with Marco Polo walkie-talkie video app

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This week, more people downloaded the Marco Polo app from the Apple iOS app store than such long-established household names as Google Chrome, WhatsApp, Skype or Twitter, according to market tracker

Apptopia.

This is a big deal for a small app run by a mom and pop who fled Poland and Ukraine to find a better life in the United States. They created the app as a way to better communicate with the folks back home.

The video messaging app was first released in 2014, so it's been around for some time and has always had its fans. But the effect of being homebound during the coronavirus shutdown has had folks looking for novel ways to stay in touch with other people, and word has spread fast about Marco Polo.

"Chat apps are great if you have lots of free time," says Vlada Bortnik, who co-founded Marco Polo with husband Michal and serves as the CEO. "But if you're like most of us—moms who are homeschooling, running a business and cooking dinner—it's hard to find the time."

Marco Polo's twist on [video communication](#) is as simple as the old swimming pool game with the same name. It's a walkie-talkie video message app. You shoot a "Marco" video message and send it to your friend who then responds with a "Polo" response video.

Thus, you've made contact, but you don't have to both be ready to connect live at the same time.

Instead, you respond when you have free time.

If you do want to talk live, you do it differently from a live video app like Skype or Zoom. You Marco Polo back and forth, but in real time, like video texting.

Marco Polo has plenty of competition. Zoom, the app favored by companies for meetings, has been discovered by the public, which is

using it for online learning, to stream worship services and even by folks looking to re-create dinner parties and the like online. The app is No. 1 on both the iOS and Google Play Android charts, where other popular video apps include House Party, favored by teens for ground hangout sessions, and Google Duo, which is the company's answer to Apple's FaceTime video chat.

All offer real-time video chat, unlike Marco Polo's back and forth.

The Polo app itself has over 10 million downloads. And in the past few weeks of the coronavirus crisis, it has experienced a 1,147% increase in new signups and a 145% increase in activity, according to Bortnik.

"It's all been organic and just word of mouth," she says. Especially during these dark days, we all want to reach out to family and friends, and "see what they look like. You ask how they are, and are they truly fine, or coughing up a storm?"

As she said recently, on Twitter: "Now more than ever, seeing faces is so much more connecting than seeing emojis."

Of course, the Bortniks make it easy to have fun at the same time. Polo [video](#) messages get the extra additions of funny voices that can be added in—like those of a "robot," "macho" tone or a super-high "helium" balloon voice. You can also draw on the image, add text and Instagram like color filters.

Bortnik arrived in America by way of Kansas and began her tech career at Microsoft, where she met Michal and worked on products like Office, Hotmail and MSN. She and Michal ended up in the San Francisco area, where they started a consulting firm, which led to Joya Communications, the parent company of Marco Polo.

Now they're based in Palo Alto, California, and have a worldwide team of 37 remote workers (in 15 states and 3 countries) on the app. She says they have not had a hard time keeping up with the increased traffic.

The big question investors want to know: How does Marco Polo expect to make money one day? The app is currently ad-free and will always stay that way, she says. They do offer a \$10 premium monthly subscription for fans of the app who want to help "support" it, and in return, they get access to a full library of their past Polo videos, which at some point disappear from the free model.

Her hope is that, eventually, people will pay "for something they find valuable," as she explores the economic model and final pricing that works with her vision.

Even with all the funny voices and colorful graphics, Marco Polo's audience isn't just kids, she says, but the average is adults, ages 25 to 54, who are just looking for a way to connect on their time.

"All of us want that," she says.

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