

Video Chat Services Let You Converse Face-to-Face

VIDEO CALLS ARE a great way to communicate. You can talk to and see remote colleagues, clients, friends, and relatives. You can trade files, leave messages, and text chat, as well. And with ooVoo or Skype, you can do all of that (and more) for free.

These Voice-over-IP services also let you place calls to landline and cell numbers, a feature you must pay for. (Advanced features, such as multiparty videoconferencing, are other paid options. You can't call 911, however.) In my tests, Skype's audio and video quality came out slightly ahead of ooVoo's.

ooVoo 2.0

The free version of ooVoo supports voice and video calls with other ooVoo users, and lets you have two or three people on a call. You can record video messages, set up a video chat room, and share files (up to 25MB), too.

The app, decked out in black and silvery-gray hues, makes finding what you need easy. In the default video-call

window, the well-designed, angled video screens are the same size and sit side by side.

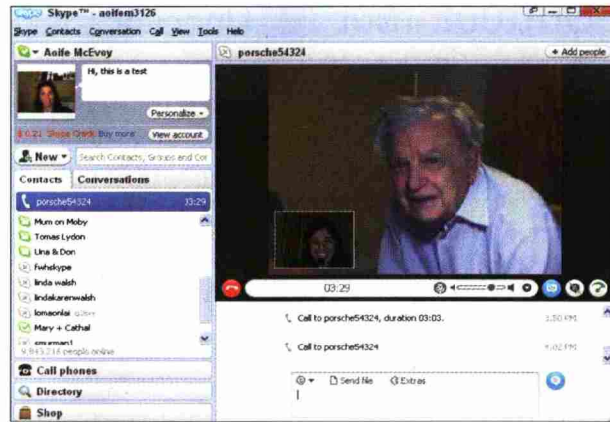
Video streams were generally smooth with little distortion, though the skin tones seemed bland. Audio quality was mostly solid: Voices were clear, but I noticed a considerable amount of echo.

Unfortunately, the free version of ooVoo sports garish ads that span the bottom of the videoconferencing window. Ads appeared in the text chat windows, too.

Friends who do not have ooVoo software installed can now call you over the Web. Within ooVoo, you click a button and type your buddy's e-mail address and a message. Your pal can then call you, via their browser. As long as your friend has a Webcam, the same video-call window pops up, and the experience is identical to that of a regular video call.

Skype 4.0

The latest Skype feels slicker and spruced up. But it also seems cluttered, and it gob-



THOUGH SKYPE 4.0 offers improved video and audio quality, its new interface feels cluttered, with more details on display.

bles up more desktop space.

Skype 4.0 shows contacts and conversations in a single pane. You can split the pane, but the separated halves still feel bulky. More stuff is on display by default, and the panes are larger to hold all of it. For example, during a call, you get a box with your photo (or icon) plus a message window and buttons for your Skype account and personalization options.

Some new features work well. The Conversations tab lets you flit around from video calls to voice calls to IM chats. And I like being able to engage in a video call right off the bat; previously Skype users had to initiate a voice call and then launch the videoconferencing portion.

The company claims that audio and video quality have improved—and in my tests, voices did sound slightly sharper than before. I never heard words breaking up and sounding stuttered, as I did with previous versions.

Video quality was good, too. The stream had minimal

choppiness, and just a couple of brief freeze-ups. Also, the colors appeared richer and less washed out.

That said, some current Skype users might want to pass on this upgrade: Version 4.0 doesn't allow you to start new public chats, though you can continue to participate in your existing chats. (Skype says that it plans to reintroduce public chats in future updates.)

—Aoife M. McEvoy



THE FREE OOVOO offers an attractive and sleek interface for video calls, but incessant and obtrusive ads mar the experience.



ooVoo 2.0 | ooVoo

Offers good voice and video quality and features three-way calling. Free (basic service) find.pcworld.com/62525



Skype 4.0 | Skype

Latest version has better sound and video, but its new interface is bulky. Free (basic service) find.pcworld.com/62524

