Cambridge scientist launches free VR platform that eliminates the fear of public speaking

Dr Chris Macdonald creates free virtual reality platform that transforms users into skilled and confident public speakers.


Dr Chris MacDonald wearing the VR headset

CAMBRIDGE, UNITED KINGDOM, March 18, 2025 /EINPresswire.com/ -- This weekend was World Speech Day, a day where we are called upon to embrace public speaking opportunities. Unfortunately, this call to action is unlikely to be widely embraced given that the majority of people are affected by speech anxiety and the fear of public speaking. Fortunately, however, there is now a free and highly effective solution.

At Lucy Cavendish College, University of Cambridge, researchers are using emerging digital technology to enrich and accelerate learning. Their Immersive Technology Lab received a national innovation award for a project that uses VR to better translate and visualise emissions data. Now they have launched a free online platform where users transform into skilled and confident public speakers. Lab Director and platform founder, Dr Chris Macdonald, explains, “In physical reality, a user might be practising a presentation alone in their bedroom but on the new virtual reality platform, they can experience the sensation of presenting to a wide range of increasingly challenging photorealistic audiences.”

> “I set out with an ambitious mission: make the most effective treatment for the most common fear and make it freely accessible to all. I now believe I have achieved that.”
>
> *Dr Chris Macdonald*

Impact at scale:
By developing a method that converts smartphones into VR headsets, Dr Macdonald has made sure that the platform is accessible to all. Importantly, the platform has been built in such a way

that whether a participant is using the latest standalone VR headset or an old smartphone inserted into a device mount, they will get the same content and the same experience.

Woman practicing in front of audience in VR

Device mount and phone, with virtual audience on the screen

Impact at speed:
As recently revealed in the academic journal, Frontiers, the platform has been clinically proven to significantly increase levels of confidence for most users after a single 30-minute session. And, in the most recent trial with students from Cambridge and UCL, it was found that a week of self-guided use was beneficial to 100% of participants.

User-centric design:
A user-centric iterative process ensured that the platform would work 'in the wild'. In between each rebuild thus far, the platform has hosted over 50,000 practice presentations from remote beta users. To further stress test the software and hardware, in-person events were organised, one of which involved over 1000 members of the public using the platform in suboptimal conditions in a demo room in Cambridge. To further expand and deepen the participant pool, the lab went on tour. This included stops at the largest science and technology events such as New Scientist Live as well as less formal settings such as a local market, library, community centre, church, and even someone's living room.

Dr Macdonald says, "I wanted to build something that is not only highly effective but that can and will be used by those who need it the most.
World firsts:
Multiple firsts were achieved to make the platform uniquely accessible and effective.

To increase accessibility, it was essential that the platform worked on both Android and iOS operating systems. To achieve this, a first-of-its-kind, dual-compatible VR player was created. As a result, not only is this the first time that this treatment is available for free worldwide, but it is also the first time it is accessible via multiple devices and multiple operating systems. In short, many firsts were completed to achieve impact at scale.

The efficacy is increased with Overexposure Therapy (the ability to repeatedly practice in extreme scenarios that one is unlikely to encounter in real life, such as hyper-distracting stadiums—a concept Dr Macdonald pioneered). It provides the psychological equivalent of

running with weights or at high altitudes; it builds extra adaptability, grit, and resilience.

Dr Macdonald explains, “Prior to a presentation, most students tend to practice on their own, in a highly-controlled environment—normally in their bedrooms to an ‘audience’ of zero. As a result, it will feel like a significant ‘step up’ when they present to even a small group of people—and even a subtle audience gesture can throw them off. By contrast, students who use the VR platform can practice in a different venue every night to a wide range of highly distracting audiences and fear-inducing scenarios. They can, for example, practice in a stadium in front of 10,000 animated spectators, with loud noises, stadium lights, and flashing cameras. Accordingly, a subsequent presentation to a small group can feel like a significant ‘step down’. The data shows that this process not only increases confidence, adaptability, and resilience but also the enjoyment of public speaking. Students are enjoying the challenge of pushing themselves and progressing to each new level. This increased enjoyment is highly encouraging because we know that fear and anxiety are maintained or worsened through avoidance.”

“In addition to the range of presentation-style audiences, the platform also provides more specialised environments and challenges, such as reading a teleprompter in a virtual TV studio or responding to questions in a job or radio interview. To offer additional support on perfecting your scripts, I built and embedded an AI coach. And beyond the main platform that is now freely available via a dedicated website, I have created licensing plans and an app for healthcare providers. I am also collaborating with organisations that seek to support specific groups such as children who stammer; the goal is to create more targeted treatment options for those who need it the most.”

“It is very promising to see how effective the platform is given that we already know ways to make it even more effective. However, to continue its development, expand it long-term, and launch additional features and platforms, we need funding. Therefore, I encourage philanthropists and sponsors to reach out. We are data-driven and uniquely committed to impact at scale. With the right funding, together, we could transform millions of lives.”

To contact Dr Chris Macdonald, click here.
To access related press images and videos, click here.

Dr Chris Macdonald established the multi-award-winning Immersive Technology Lab to investigate the transformative potential of emerging technologies for education and healthcare. Chris is a Fellow at Lucy Cavendish College, University of Cambridge. Chris was recently crowned the winner of the 40 Under 40 Award in the Science and Innovation category.

Dr Chris Macdonald
Lucy Cavendish College
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