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6 How We Learned to Stop SWATing and Love the (Zoom-)Bomb: A (De)predatory History of Disrupting the Live Stream

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G(r)eek Chorus: Introduction and Context(s)

On October 8, 2020, Christine served as cochair of the Junior Fellow Lecture Series, a long-running University of Toronto event where graduate students remix and present research around a theme of the month. It was our first full academic year to be scheduled around the global COVID-19 pandemic. All talks were telecast via Zoom. To match this year's screened-over nature, Christine centered the talks around digital memes. Our institution still operated under the colloquial "U of T" time, where events start late on purpose, to hold over from prepandemic days when the expanse of the school's urban campus landscape rendered a walk from one class to another into a commute. Even after the pandemic downloaded our events into our phones and laptops, lecturers carried over this temporal tradition into our (first) year of "blended learning." As these ten minutes of chatter concluded, the first alarm rang from the screen's bottom corner: at a low angle, a video of someone masturbating.

"Hey, Christine, you're hot!" heckled one of the rectangles. Music blared through the speakers. Pornographic images were screen-shared en masse; one graphic act overtook the room completely while the other nonswarming group members in the Zoom were called out by name and a shrill chorus of prepubescent voices chanted racial slurs. Unfamiliar icons from video games scattered across a room of familiar faces (*Among Us* imposters were among us). The shock of several colleagues was physically documented. Others laughed; some danced to the music. Gathering their wares, Christine ended the meeting and reconvened on the group's Discord server.

"Well, that was my first Zoom-Bomb!" a colleague (a white, male, and dancing one) put in the chat. Another graduate student asked, "We were

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hacked? Do they know my location now!?" An administrator would ask if Christine wanted university police to investigate. Christine would never find out if there was, indeed, a *CSI: Cyber*–type subdivision of campus security. Yet these provocations to secure in the face of streaming did not go away as we continued to PhD on Zoom.

This chapter is incubated in the disruption. Academic live streaming has sold us the dream of uncut interaction among our advisors, students, and selves over dispersed geography. We began this research in July 2020, several months *before* Christine's Zoom-Bomb. It was also four months into Canada's first COVID-19 lockdown, which upended academic calendars the world over, including our first years as doctoral students. As we surrendered our in-person conferences for Zoom links, we also theorized the role of interruption in our streamed-rolled lives. As plosive impositions of civic space, Zoom-Bombs—the phenomenon that Christine experienced—reproduce what E. Gabriella Coleman (2012) calls the "rich aesthetic tradition of spectacle and transgression at play with trolls" (101). Immersed in this audacious culture of hackers, pranksters, and other interrupting interlocutors, we examine the question: Was the live stream a technology built around disruption? To answer this, we examine networked disruption at three epochs: (1) a prehistory of the live streams in telecommunications metaphors, (2) the eminence of "swatting" in video game live streaming communities, and (3) institutional responses to Zoom-Bombed academic events. As spectators and streamers cope with how a sniper's gaze shrivels their teaching and gaming experiences, the background noise of cultural work's hazards reaches new levels of amplification.

Prehistory: On Stranger Tides

Why "streaming"? Electrical engineering discourse's hold over these metaphors carries into media studies, which rely on the technician and technologists' vocabulary to comprehend how it is that these media technologies operate. Ghislain Thibault (2015) highlights the lineage of hydrologic metaphors employed in articulating the relationship between media and its audiences, such as radio waves, television channels, surfing the web, bit torrents, etc. Today's liquid metaphors for media technology carry over from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when referring to electrical systems dominating our vernacular. For example, electrical "current" traversed cables,

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wires, and tubes; electromagnetic "waves" were transmitted and received. Such hydrospheric discursive operators often obscure the material realities and the conditions that drive these media technologies. By metaphorically relying on liquid metaphors, streaming media services evocatively suggest the idea of real time, continuous time, and the uninterrupted flow of content. Yet although digital streaming media services may appear continuous, at the level of bits and bytes the coding and decoding algorithms used to parse, segment, and compress the video files are only simulating a real-time and/or continuous live experience. The digital signal must be unpacked, decoded, buffered, and reassembled to be legible to the human user. The codec is materially analogous to the shipping container. It essentially does for the streaming media economy what the shipping container does for the global supply chain. That is, it offers an efficient and effective distribution of content and the emergence of new technical standards in industry (Levinson 2016).

Contemporary live streaming practices are sites of struggle and rupture—sites that make threadbare the hegemonic discourses of the digital media industry. As Friedrich Kittler (1990) elucidates, nineteenth-century media technologies such as the telegraph, typewriter, and telephone did not just fundamentally change how people communicated with each other. Instead, these media technologies changed the very perception of people's minds and bodies. The persistence of hydrospheric metaphors in contemporary media prompts us to queer these metaphors drawing on the Foucauldian idea of archaeology, which insists on making explicit the deep principles of knowledge. Although streaming media, much like their hydrospheric doppelgangers, streams are placid compared to torrents, floods, rapids, etc. (Burroughs 2019, 147). To use Geoffrey Winthrop-Young's (2010) heuristics, these media technologies are made of a stack of hardware, software, and wetware (186). The streaming hardware consists of desktop computers, laptops, cell phones, set-top boxes, smart TVs, IP TV boxes, etc. Streaming software is made up of browsers, codecs, video encryption algorithms, digital rights management (DRM), etc. Atop this is the cultural workers/wetware layer of the streaming software stack, which includes content creators from Twitch streamers to webcam models. Technorhetorical slights of hand (aka water metaphors) help to consolidate (separate) these cultural layers with (from) the technical before the consumer's eyes.

Building Zoom-Bombs as a *cultural technique* of hydrographic genealogy, we see how streaming has long been a downloader of cultural transgression.

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Bernhard Siegert (2015) mobilizes the idea of cultural techniques to highlight the operations or sequences of operations that historically and logically precede the media concepts generated by them (15). We start with the term "filibuster," derived from the Dutch word *vrijbuiter*—meaning "privateer," "pirate," or "robber" used by sixteenth-century Dutch colonists to refer to the pirates of the Caribbean. The Spanish iteration of the term *filibustero* was used in the nineteenth century to refer to the US pirates that would commandeer Spanish colonists' naval vessels. The pirates would hijack the ships of Spanish conquistadors and steal their booty. The term is now used in contemporary parlance to refer to a method of hijacking US Senate proceedings by boisterous senators who talk for too long, sometimes clad in diapers or spouting nonsense. The ease with which men in power wield disruptive techniques as a weapon to get ahead is a leitmotif that echoes through history. As a disruptor, the filibuster subverts the system to establish dominance in the ecosystem. It is the penchant for this domination through communicative acts that we will be exploring in the next genealogical variant.

. . . and SWAT about It?

Where pestering bleeds into predation, "swatting" is born. The *International Encyclopedia of Gender, Media, and Communication* defines "swatting" as a subgenre of "doxxing": a publication of someone's private address for the purpose of isolating the person. In this family of action, swatting draws its name from its policing dimension, or when "a specific type of doxxing when . . . a false report made [is] to police of a severe crime committed at the address, which requires a Special Weapons and Tactics (*SWAT*) team to invade the target's residence" (Eckert and Metzger-Riftkin 2020, 2, emphasis added). Sarah Jeong (2015) condenses these techniques for us into this graceful turn of phrase: "assault by proxy" (31). Misery is the recognizable infrastructure of commercial internet activities. As Coleman (2012) writes, "Trolls work to remind the 'masses' that have lapped onto the shores of the internet that there is still a class of geeks who, as their name suggests, will cause Internet grief, hell, and misery" (109). In recent years, the market for internet misery has evolved past the proprietorship of self-declared trolls. The persistence of troll events like Zoom-Bombs and video game stream swatting reveal the porosity of live connection: holes persist in this seemingly endless flow of digital spacetime. Through disruption events like

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swatting, streamers and other players, however, find themselves pulled out of these holes and into the abyss.

The "Wichita Swatting" incident is held as the worst-case scenario for this kind of assault. In 2017, Kansas state police deployed a SWAT team to the home of Andrew Finch, who was killed in the altercation. Casey Viner and Shane Gaskill—two people unrelated to Finch—became agitated with each other over a "friendly fire" incident in the game *Call of Duty: WWII*. Finch was not a known gamer and had zero involvement in this gaming community. Viner and Gaskill's identification as gamers, however, took center stage in this narrative. Viner and Gaskill's conflict escalated over Twitter, with Viner threatening to kill Gaskill over wagers' loss during the match. According to an *LA Times* report, "Gaskill posted an address on West McCormick Street in Wichita and dared Viner to 'try some (expletive)'" (Queally 2018). Tyler Barriss, then twenty-five, contacted the address and called the Wichita police department with a threat. Identifying himself with a pseudonym, Barriss claimed to be holding his family hostage after killing his father at gunpoint. Following the address given to them, SWAT forces invaded Andrew Finch's home on West McCormick Street and killed him. While active streaming was not directly a part of the Wichita swatting incident, the combined terms "Wichita," "Gaskill," and "swatting" irrevocably became attached to the gaming community. Barriss, a racialized man, became the face of swatting as its deadliest.

Lost in these conversations about Barriss's persecution is the role of carceral forces in Finch's death. Plenty of media discourse is dedicated to the role of troll-adjacent technologies in facilitating Finch's demise—such as the toxicity of gamer culture, which, again, Finch had no part in. Live video technologies that had no real place in this specific swatting tragedy were blamed before militarized police. We could find no mainstream media criticism that focused on why it simply takes prank calls for police forces to self-justify violent force against an unarmed citizen. Official Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) definitions of "swatting" likewise emphasize the prankster's dramaturgy (and thus primary guilt). To the bureau, any "hoax call made" constitutes doxxing (FBI 2021).

As of late 2020, the FBI's hijacking of secured smart devices was continually identified as a source to record or actively record live stream events (Cimpanu 2021). Smart camera footage can be manipulated, deleted, and/or distorted; thermostats can be remotely recalibrated; smart doors can be

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unlocked; baby monitors can be meddled with; and so on and so forth. These acts of remote home invasion (i.e., home invasion without human actors at the scene) have a military history in drone pilots. A cursory search of “swatting” on YouTube generates half a million results; the top videos are compilations displaying titles such as “Top 10 Gamers Swatting on Live Stream,” “Streamers SWATTED Live during Their Stream,” and a *VICE News* minidocumentary on “Police Militarization Meets Hacker Culture: Swatting.” Such an archive of combative spectacle resonates with what Roger Stahl (2010) terms “militainment,” or the long-standing tradition of consumer commodities that transform warfare into entertainment. Video platforms like YouTube archive the live militainment of swatting, long beyond the moment of geotagging, locating, and police dispensation. In a patrilineally reproducing family of interrupters, the digital replay of swatting opens the door for Zoom-Bombs.

Play and Depredate

Why are the most famous swatting examples associated with game live streams? Swatting, like other forms of doxxing and disruption, is culturally aligned with the contentious term: “gamer culture.” If we locate Zoom-Bombs as the media grandchild of swatting—and swatting within the genealogy of doxxing practice—it becomes difficult to discuss these predatory aesthetics, apart from “a male backchannel” of masculine gamer discourse (Nakamura 2012, para. 8). Sending a brigade to someone’s home to disrupt the flow of their game reflects an undercurrency to Mia Consalvo’s (2007) concept of “gaming capital,” or the inputs and outputs that distinguish “good players” from “bad players.” Under the logic of gaming capital, these kinds of disputes let spectators loot capital back from the gamer. Although gaming spectatorship predates the ascent of Twitch and game streaming, Twitch has transformed this mode of watching each other play through live interactions and chats.

At the onset of COVID-19, reports on the growth of Twitch stream views initially were exponential (Stephen 2020). Yet for many, this renewed attention to spectatorship and games hearkened memories of Gamergate, a technomediated and prolonged harassment event from 2014 onward. From *Depression Quest* developer Zoë Quinn to the mobbing and doxxing of *Tropes vs. Women* commentator Anita Sarkeesian, women and feminists

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in the game industry are normalized for violent harassment by Gamergate's online mobs. As with live streaming and swatting, Gamergate harassment tactics emphasized the location and broadcast of private residences as a common technique to instigate fear along gendered lines. Gamergate was not an insular event. To femininst game scholars, the "symbolic" violence of Gamergate challenged widespread separations in rhetoric between virtual, discursive forms of violence from "real," physical ones (Gray, Buyukozturk, and Hill 2017). Massanari (2017) asks us to consider the direct affordances of cultural platforms like Reddit in aggregating aggressive behavior through up-votes and other applauding affordances. These platform affordances might be viewed as props in a larger-aesthetic chain reaction.

Writing in 2014, *Deadspin* author Kyle Wagner (2014) forewarned that Gamergate was likely "a rehearsal, where the mechanisms of a toxic and inhumane politics are being tested and improved" (para. 30). As the extreme right exclusionary populist alt-right jumped from the geekier edges of the entertainment industries to the center stage of political discourse and culture in the wake of the 2016 US presidential election, some journalists suggested that "geek culture" had become a way for young men to be radicalized into a particularly toxic form of misogynist and racist masculinity (Hudson 2018; Nagle 2017; Urquhart 2019). The alt-right movement's views draw on the men's rights movement, which views men as victims of female equality, anchored by the strong internet presence of 4chan and 8chan. In the American context, these views attract religious extremists, Tea Party advocates, and anti-Semitic conspiracy theorists, among others (Thompson 2018).

From the standpoint of nonenthusiasts looking in, swatting is a confusing telephone game of human interlocutor that certainly fits into a certain stereotype about aggressive gamer masculinity. As Derek Burrill (2018) posits:

> [G]amer identity of the late 2000s and 2010s—the identity most commonly associated with the trolls and bullies behind Gamergate—is produced and reproduced through normative associations between gender and technology, cultural practices and the public sphere, as well as result of the ubiquity and normalization of war and battle videogames. (24)

Live streaming platforms like Twitch make access to this military media more widespread. Now a player need not be active in *Call of Duty*, for example, to participate in the spectacle of militainment. We can "just watch." Yet

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as the murder of the nongamer Andrew Finch via swatting in 2017 shows, the passive position is no guarantee of safety. Live streamed violence does not need your consent or participation in the adjacent culture to victimize you. When Christine was Zoom-Bombed, they and the university learned of the existence of Reddit boards and Discord servers that circulate private passwords and links. Just as Reddit serves as a gamified amplifier for Gamergate harassment, so does this legacy of online harassment survive in the stream-rolled academy of COVID-19. To understand the converging histories of depredation and pestering that resulted in the Zoom-Bomb, media scholars have to treat these breaches as technical, cultural, and *historical* antecedents.

(Re)enter the Zoom-Bomb

Zoom Video Communications was founded in 2011, which is coincidentally the same year as the live streaming site and occasional purveyor of swatting content, Twitch.tv. Just as Twitch was not developed to be a games streaming site per se (the former Justin.tv was oriented to lifecasting), Zoom was not developed to be a public streaming website. Rather, it began as a telecommunication service whose software went public in 2014 and rapidly grew into the "unicorn" company of business communication start-ups well before the 2020 pandemic turned it into a household name. Zoom marketed itself as a telephone. Its Zoom Phone software premised itself on the vision of C-suite executives being able to master teleconferencing from the palms of their smartphones.

As Zoom-Bombing infiltrated the vernacular of 2020 classrooms, institutional responses were characterized by quaint off-loading of labor onto the instructor. The University of Utah, for example, created a colorful infographic guide on how to "Zoom-Bomb proof" your event or classroom. Some tips included instructions on creating links and removing screen-sharing capacities. Yet other tips were inclined to identity policing: "Avoid using your Personal Meeting ID (PMI) in public events" and "Do not share your meeting link or social media or any public platform" (Rhodes 2020). These dictates positioned instructors as deputies of their own digital towns, braced for the prospect of unwanted visitors ("Remove unwanted participants and prevent them from rejoining"). They were also to be bouncers, appraising the "realness" of students ("Make sure 'Only *authenticated* users can join meetings' is selected," emphasis added). In effect, institutions downloaded

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responsibility onto the user. These responsibilities required not only managing the educational content flows of the classroom, but also facilitating rhetorical transactions.

Popular media leaned on a politically neutral vocabulary to summarize this phenomenon. As the news site *How-to-Geek* characterized it:

> This issue isn't necessarily *a security flaw*. The problem is how people handle public Zoom meeting links. These links are shared thousands of times between clients, friends, colleagues, classmates, and so on. Careless handling of them can result in a Zoom meeting being open to public access. Then, anyone who finds the link can join an in-progress meeting. (Gunnell 2020, para. 4)

Such rhetoric responsibilized victims in two ways. First, it framed live harassment as external to Zoom itself. The error was not in the security systems, but rather the users. Second, it dismissed the violence of Zoom-Bombs as the result of inattention on both ends: victims as careless handlers and the Bombers' actions themselves as "usually done in an attempt to gain a few cheap laughs at the expense of the participants." The low currency valuation of these laughs may be inadequate for nongaming enthusiasts, as suggested by how *The Daily Beast* characterized bombers as "tricksters" (Sommer 2020, para. 2). The popular technical press response to Zoom-Bombs tends to reproduce the logic that we see in institutional responses to Zoom-Bombing: a matter of "[c]areless handling." This discourse downloads the risk onto instructors, administrators, and other classroom interlocutors, offering little systemic critique about where these techniques are learned and what kind of literacies they demand from workers who go unpaid for this additional labor. Such popular responses tend to downplay the fact that many Zoom-Bombs are enacted through the language of racialized and misogynistic violence. Consider Christine's experience with Zoom-Bombing, where the disruptors commented on Christine's appearance and used racialized slurs. As of this writing, the ways that Zoom streaming can be operationalized for conservative ideology have only expanded. On the weekend of March 25, 2020, the young MAGA operative Charlie Kirk and the undercover conservative trickster James O'Keefe put out calls in widely circulated tweets for conservative college students to take advantage of new online classes by recording their professors (Sommer 2020).

The progression of how discursive acts of recreational nastiness made by involuntary celibates (incels), men's rights activists (MRAs), and the antifeminist community Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW), which are

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meant to be read as performances of virtual manhood, turn into violent outbursts—as seen in the case of Elliot Rodger and Alek Minassian—begs the question: *cui bono*? (Beran 2018; Jane 2018; Moloney and Love 2018). Understanding Gamergate as the genesis of a greater cultural battle over the conversations around space, visibility, and inclusion makes it clear that this was a proxy war being waged to redraw the borders of the hegemonic domain of culture. In the manosphere, the sentiment that was being affectively communicated through social media technologies was that the pole position of white cis-male heteropatriarchy in the social order was under threat (Van Valkenburgh 2018).

Conclusions

Zoom-Bombs are just one genus of confrontations with the vulnerabilities inherent to live stream technologies. To think that a "stream" was once a thing. Like a complex swatting of your least favorite live streamer, streams are rather a series of tactical processes: setting up a waiting room, adjusting your webcam, and imagining your audience. Interruption becomes infrastructural to insurrection. Just as these real-time technologies host a space to fantasies of continuous flow, they also grant space for popular ideations of civic interruption to beta-test themselves on the most vulnerable. By understanding these histories of broadcasting yourself as already a tactical and (de)predatory struggle, we suggest future understandings of live streaming culture to begin not where the broadcast flows, but rather where it "leaks."

Released in March 2021, *Zoom Escaper* (see figure 6.1) is an extension that exploits the normalization of streaming "leaks" to create ready-built auditory interruptions for your next video call. Do you really not want to be in this meeting? Deploy an "Upset Baby" or "Urination" sound effect to launch the social emergency of choice and be your ticket out. Like a Zoom-Bomb of sexualized slurs, the gendered register of interruption strikes again. Would a "Woman Crying" caution a call from the SWAT team? Or would it not be a good enough reason to end the feed? The power struggles for your attention continue to spill over into cultural, technical, and historical conversations in media studies. After all, to disrupt is often to reassert the privileged position; to feel confident that one is doing something of consequence as one disrupts someone else is to forcefully impose one's sense of self, being,

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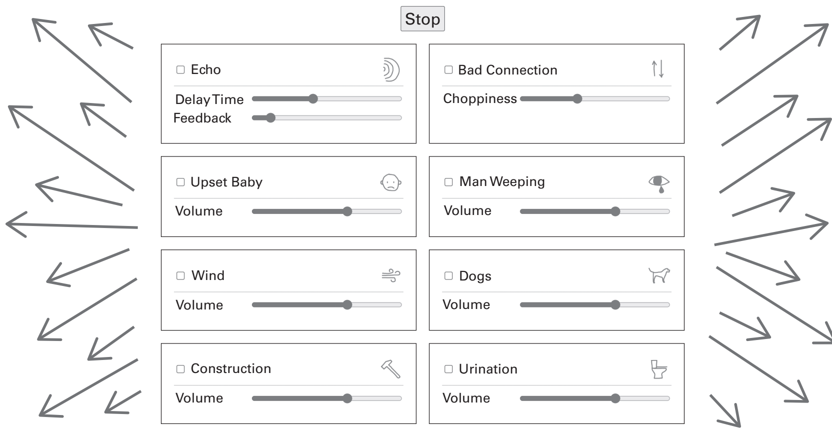

Figure 6.1
Zoom Escaper allows users to interrupt their own video call with a host of sound effects.

worth, and politics onto the proceedings. Take the events on January 6, 2021, when seditious actors participated in acts of insurrection at the US Capitol in Washington, D.C.; the media constitute and influence the conditions of human sensing and knowing of this (Horn 2007, 8). Before insurrectionists arrived that day with the intent to disrupt the next president's affirmation, the competencies, fluencies, and literacies adjacent to swatting and doxxing had long been developing on digital platforms. By breaking down what disrupts a live stream through a communicative act such as Zoom-Bombing, we would like to point to how one is being encultured into a suite of cultural practices enfolded through this communicative act.

Like a good Zoom-Bomb, a genealogy of live streaming should blow up the integrity of the object itself. Is a teleconference call a stream? Or a FaceTimed visit to Grandma's? Or a faculty meeting via Microsoft Teams? By locating disruption in different media, we see the early elements of mainstream live stream cultures reoccurring in various forms: the trolls, the economies of attention, and familiar expectations of etiquettes and responsibilities placed upon those who orchestrate our attention. Zoom-Bombs were foreshadowed in the live stream genealogy of "depredatory" logics that made telephone wires into a spectator sport and made victims out of hosts. More than isolated harassment events specific to the academies of COVID-19, Zoom-Bombs were foreshadowed in the live stream medium's relationship with depredatory logics. The vocabulary of this depredation,

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in its mediated avatar, is militaristic a priori: for example, the military raid, a tactic used to exhaust the enemy by engineering chaos. As institutions aspire to leverage new genres of live streaming, the persistence of depredatory harassment groups and tactics shows that we are not always ready to manage the cultural forces attached to these technologies—nor always equipped to contend with their long-developed literacies in cruelty. Historicizing the vulnerabilities of live streaming to militant depredation tactics like Zoom-Bombs can clarify how institutions structure technological conditions that, if they do not outright reproduce harassment, render our most vulnerable actors to the mercy of their demoralization tactics.

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Real Life in Real Time

Live Streaming Culture

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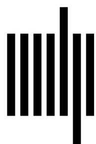

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