17 Live Streaming as a Cultural Industry

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In fall 2019, the gaming live streamer Tyler "Ninja" Blevins appeared on season two of FOX's game show *The Masked Singer*, disguised as an oversized ice cream cone and singing Lil Nas X's "Old Town Road."[1] The episode was an unusual collision of online celebrity, borne of social media platforms, and legacy media. Why, exactly, was a creator best associated with streaming video games on Twitch and YouTube warbling on prime-time television alongside celebrities like Wayne Brady and Johnny Weir? And what can this episode teach us about the relationship between legacy media and online cultural production?

Less than two decades after Twitch's first round of seed funding, live streaming has become a commercially and culturally significant form of online media production.[2] Although a full literature review is beyond this chapter's scope, there's little doubt that scholars interested in live streaming have always been aware of its commercial dimensions. Early studies of camming on uStream and Live stream (Senft 2008) or rebroadcasts of sports on Justin.tv (Bruns 2009) recognized that live streaming was part of a wave of novel forms of cultural production made possible by the internet. Others linked live streaming to participatory culture, such as Henry Jenkins's (2006) well-known book that has come to refer to modes of vernacular cultural production that could disrupt the hierarchies of legacy media by "democratizing" creative work. More recent work has built on these foundations by examining the actual labor conditions of streamers and the political economies they act within, as well as accounting for live streaming's explosive growth during the 2010s. These days, there can be little doubt that live streaming is exemplary of a broader "platformization of cultural production" (Nieborg and Poell 2018) in which digital platforms like Twitch and YouTube have become key intermediaries for the production, monetization, and circulation of cultural content.

Even so, live streaming's status as an industry is a comparatively recent phenomenon and underdiscussed. What is at stake when seeing live streaming not just as a commercial activity, but as a cultural industry? Scholars often reach for the metaphor of the toolbox, a ready-to-hand repository of theories and methods waiting to be matched with research questions. Although useful for thinking about a multiplicity of approaches, it obscures an important fact: theories and methods do not simply provide ways of looking at a predetermined object. Rather, they construct what that object is in the first place. In this sense, seeing live streaming as a cultural industry is not simply a matter of bringing new perspectives to familiar empirical territory—it means being reflexive about how that territory and its problem space are themselves transformed by the tools we have to study them, for better and worse.

In what follows, I don't offer new data about live streaming. Instead, I want us to think about how the cultural industries approach constructs a problem space that expands both the empirical and theoretical horizons of current research into live streaming. In my view, it is also an opportunity to think about the uneasy relationship between so-called legacy media and companies like Twitch. What is *actually* new and distinctive about these new stewards of culture, and what is simply familiar dynamics in a new context? Applying the cultural industries approach helps us see that live streaming is, perhaps, not quite as disruptive as its beneficiaries claim. That's not to say *nothing* is new, but instead it's to situate live streaming in a historical trajectory that sees the actually existing live streaming industry as neither necessary nor impossible.

The Cultural Industries Perspective

If culture refers to "the signifying system through which necessarily (though among other means) a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced, and explored" (Williams 1981, 13), then cultural industries are those "institutions that are most directly involved in the production of social meaning" (Hesmondhalgh 2018, 483).[3] Typically, cultural industries have included sectors like journalism, book publishing, music, film, television, and, more recently, digital games. More recent scholarship has expanded this category to include "social media entertainment," Stuart Cunningham and David Craig's (2019) term for content created by influencers and other creators who primarily make and distribute their creative output on social platforms, including (but not limited to) live streaming platforms.

At first glance, the term "cultural industries" recalls Frankfurt School's notion of the "culture industry," most clearly articulated in Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* ([1944] 1977). But there also some important distinctions as well, and these distinctions reflect the ways that the concept has grown in sophistication over the last century. Tracing these offers a way into thinking about Twitch's place in this history and scholars' attempts to understand it.

Like many Marxists of their generation, Adorno and Horkheimer found themselves struggling to make sense of capitalism's endurance despite its material inequities. Because purely economic explanations were insufficient, they turned toward studying culture as a key means by which capitalism reproduced itself. As a result, their account of the culture industry was deeply pessimistic. In their view, the "low culture" that emerged from Hollywood and Tin Pan Alley served the ruling class by turning the "masses" into "cultural dupes," dousing their revolutionary spirit and naturalizing capitalist hierarchies. Although this perspective's elitism and unsophisticated view of media effects have been heavily critiqued, it still captures something important: the cultural industries are important because they play a vital role in human sense-making, shaping what individuals think about and how they think about it.

Later research preserved the Frankfurt School's understanding of the importance of culture, but it sought to challenge the school's unitary view of cultural production, pessimism, and binary of high and low culture. The French sociologist Bernard Miège (1989), for example, illustrated how the culture industries were hardly consistent in their production processes—what worked in publishing houses had only passing relevance to film production. (Hence the term "industries" rather than "industry" is used.) Moreover, although the commodification of culture had its discontents, the fact remained that the relative autonomy given to filmmakers, novelists, and musicians meant that they sometimes created commercially successful work that challenged rather than reinforced dominant values—a significantly more ambivalent dynamic than envisioned by Adorno and Horkheimer.[4] Finally, Miège and others also illustrated how cultural producers often resisted commercial pressures from executives in order to maintain autonomy over their work, meaning that the total commodification of culture envisioned by Adorno and Horkheimer was not complete, but rather was contested.

Meanwhile, across the English Channel, the emerging field of cultural studies (from which the "cultural" of "cultural industries" is derived) retained the Frankfurt School's interest in cultural production, but rejected its binary of "high" and "low" culture. Instead, it saw all cultural products and practices as being part of the production and transformation of everyday life (Grossberg 2010). Among other things, this approach gave agency to the audience members whom Adorno and Horkheimer had largely imagined as a pliant, undifferentiated mass. Through concepts like the "encoding-decoding" framework (Hall [1984] 2003), scholars operating under the aegis of cultural studies sought to illustrate that consumers make meaning out of cultural products in ways that do not always resonate with the producer's intentions. Popular culture, then, became one site of struggle, where tensions between dominant and subordinate cultural forms are played out.

In pulling on these diverse strands of thought, we should see live streaming as complex, contested, and ambivalent in the way that other cultural industries are. This opens up a new set of questions: How does one's (social, economic, political, geographic, etc.) position within the live streaming industry shape the experience and outcomes of live streaming? How do the affordances and policies of different platforms alter creative production? (*Complexity*.) How do streamers adopt or push back against dominant values, whether expressed in terms of content moderation (e.g., by playing with the "limits" of platforms' terms of service) or broader social norms? How do they negotiate tensions with platform owners, investors, and sponsors when these invariably arise? (*Contested*.) In what ways does live streaming offer new forms of creative expression to creators, even as platformization represents a new means of commodifying culture? How do creators make sense of and live with the contradictions between "passionate work" and material instability in live streaming? (*Ambivalent*.)

None of these questions have easy answers. However, taken together, they suggest a useful baseline for thinking about live streaming that places it within a longer trajectory of cultural production and recognizes that the experiences of creators and their products are complex, contested, and ambivalent.

Technology and the Cultural Industries

All that said, the fact remains that today's most prominent live streaming platforms are relatively recent inventions. In fact, a key theme in contemporary cultural industries literature is how and the degree to which cultural industries are being transformed by digital technologies, especially digital platforms. Most scholars in this area agree that this relationship is composed of both change *and* continuity. Taking seriously the role of technological artifacts means thinking through what is distinctive about platform-based cultural production, while remembering how the long tradition of cultural production informs the creative activities of professional live streamers.

Technological innovation has always had a dynamic interplay with cultural production. Cultural producers experiment with and adopt novel technological artifacts, for reasons both creative (e.g., novel ways to express ideas) and pragmatic (e.g., cheaper production techniques). On the other hand, new technologies of distribution, whether radio or eBooks, offer Intellectual Property (IP) holders novel means of controlling the circulation of cultural content. This is particularly true of the last few decades. Increasingly powerful forms of media infrastructure regulate the movement of audiovisual signal traffic (Parks and Starosielski 2015), while digital distribution platforms like Disney+ act as gatekeepers for consumers hoping to access cultural content (Lotz 2017).

Beginning in the 2000s and accelerating in the 2010s, large technology firms have become increasingly active in the industrial production of culture. In some cases, as with Amazon and Apple, these companies have set out to create (or acquire) in-house studios capable of creating movies, television shows, and video games that can compete directly with industry incumbents. More significantly, however, these companies have offered services that host user-generated content beginning (arguably) with Google's acquisition of YouTube in 2006. Live streaming platforms like Twitch, YouTube Gaming, Mixer, and Facebook Live fit squarely within this trajectory. Some were packaged with tools (Partin 2020) that let streamers monetize their streams, which spoke to the commercial-cultural ambitions of these platforms.

The development of platforms like YouTube and Twitch were accompanied by a robust set of discourses from corporate public relations units, journalists, and academics alike that these services would "democratize" cultural production by giving ordinary people the means to make and distribute content and relegate the hierarchies of legacy media to the dustbin of the twentieth century. By and large, the more utopian predictions of the 2000s have aged poorly. Although sites like YouTube are framed as digital public spheres, antidemocratic content has flourished on these platforms not in spite of but (in part) *because of* the contrast to legacy media (Lewis 2020). Likewise, these platforms are hardly nonhierarchical. Not only do platforms routinely shape what viewers see through content moderation and algorithmic sorting, they also treat creators differentially based on their value to platform owners (Caplan and Gillespie 2020). Moreover, despite promises of decentralizing cultural production, their political economies of platforms are arguably even more concentrated and centralized than those of legacy media conglomerates.

Simultaneously, as my opening anecdote suggests, legacy media firms have embraced at least some aspects of live streaming. Not only have elite streaming celebrities like Blevins integrated with legacy media (e.g., by being signed by Creative Artists Association, appearing on *The Masked Singer,* etc.), many traditional celebrities have adopted Twitch. For example, Jordan Fisher, who achieved fame as a child actor, frequently streams on Twitch and is currently represented by the gaming influencer agency Loaded. This suggests that predictions about the destruction of the fourth estate, whether celebratory or panicked, have been somewhat exaggerated. Instead, more viable research questions should attend to where, how, and to what ends platform-based cultural production is becoming entangled with legacy media formations, and to what effects.

Distinctiveness of Cultural Industries

So far, I have offered a quick sketch of the cultural industries perspective, the special role that information communication technologies play in these industries, and the relevance of both to live streaming. Before turning to live streaming in earnest, I want to point to the features that make cultural industries distinctive not just in their outputs, but also their structure. The cultural industries scholar David Hesmondhalgh (2018) identifies a number of problems—such as the unusual structure of many misses offset by fewer megahits, high production costs but very low reproduction costs, etc.—that together shape cultural industries and the characteristic solutions that these industries have evolved to address them.

To see live streaming as a cultural industry, we might begin by asking how these questions translate to the network of platforms, streamers, firms, and fans that, together, we know as live streaming. Some of these analytics are, to be sure, more relevant than others—some, in fact, are very difficult to map onto live streaming. Yet even those that sit uneasily point to the productive play of continuity and discontinuity between traditional and platform-based cultural industries. Being attentive to where these analytics are useful *and* where they struggle can help us think through the distinctiveness of live streaming.

For purposes of space, I do not address these individually. Rather, I try to group them around two key themes that I think are the most revealing: (1) the dialectic of commerce and creativity (which is continuous when compared to twentieth-century cultural industries) and (2) the riskiness of live streaming (the relation to legacy media of which is somewhat more fraught).

Live Streaming as a Cultural Industry

Balancing Commerce and Creativity

While Western ideas about artistry have historically lionized creatives who show indifference or outright hostility to commercial pressures, the reality is that all cultural producers act within *some* kind of political economy. Whether they are market-based, grant-based, government-funded, or paid through patronage, the various means by which the material needs of creatives are met have always been enabling of cultural production, even as they are constraining in other ways. This dialectic of creativity and commerce runs deep and is not inherently problematic, although some arrangements surely are. Nevertheless, what is clear is that all creatives make choices about what kinds of cultural products are or are not commercially viable in a given context. The specifics may vary from time to time, place to place, creator to creator, but no one is truly independent.

This marks a clear point of continuity between cultural industries and live streaming. Professional streamers rely on many forms of revenue (Woodcock and Johnson 2019) that streamers must consider when making choices about what to stream, with whom, etc. For example, gaming live streamers select the titles they play on air based not just on their personal interest or creative whims, but also their audience's preferences, promotional deals with game publishers, and the popularity of a given title. Likewise, streamers modulate their on-air personas based on their revenue streams. The rise in donations, for example, pushed streamers to prioritize "relational labor"

(Baym 2018), fashioning themselves as cultural producers worthy of viewer-patrons' financial support. Similarly, beyond meeting the basic content moderation standards of a given platform, streamers make strategic choices about their branding based on their audience and sponsors. For example, Blevins declared that he would no longer swear on air in order to cultivate a "family-friendly" image that could attract sponsors who market to children. Such negotiations are a testament to the fact that live streamers, like influencers as a whole, are not inherently more independent than cultural producers working in legacy media industries. Rather, they exhibit many interlocking and sometimes contradictory dependencies on audiences, sponsors, platform owners, and game publishers.

These negotiations take place within a cultural economy in which discourses and performances of authenticity are highly prized. Even so, "authenticity" is a notoriously fluid concept and often masks the power dynamics of how online creators are perceived. For example, the gendered and racialized dimensions of authenticity mean that the balancing act between creativity and commerce is experienced differently by different streamers (Gray 2016; Ruberg, Cullen, and Brewster 2019). More recent work on live streaming has begun to examine the complexity of these negotiations in practice and how they are mediated by issues of class, subculture, and social identity, but it remains a rich topic for further study.

(Re)distributing Risk

A defining feature of cultural industries is that they are financially risky, which shapes most aspects of cultural production and distribution. Traditionally, "risk" in cultural industries refers to the financial risk assumed by investors when funding the production of cultural goods. It is broadly understood that the majority of cultural goods lose money due to the fickleness of consumer tastes and the tendency of stars and genres to fall out of favor and indeterminacy in the production process (a great script, after all, is not guaranteed to become a great movie). As a consequence, cultural industries have developed characteristic strategies for mitigating this risk. For one, they focus on established formats and brands, which accounts for the high number of sequels, reboots, and cinematic universes available to consumers today, as well as television formats that can easily and cheaply be replicated across regional markets. Moreover, they "overproduce." Because most cultural products will lose money, firms in the cultural industries must invest in multiple products simultaneously to see what resonates with consumers. Under this logic, a small number of high-performing hits will outweigh the modest losses incurred on the majority of output, leading to overproduction in the cultural industries.

How does this resonate, if at all, with live streaming? It's complicated. For one, the cultural products that demand the assumption of risk are difficult to compare. Rather than discrete products whose, say, ticket sales can be measured against production and marketing costs, live streamers create synchronous, spontaneous video sessions that may last anywhere from a few minutes to many hours. So rather than see risk as being manifested in a discrete product, I want to argue that risk, however borne, enables the creation of a *body of work* by live streamers that will support advertisements, donations, and subscriptions. In this sense, we ought to think about the totality of streamers' output and what kinds of financial risk make it possible. So, instead, we might ask: Where is financial risk in the live streaming industry located? How is it distributed, and where does it accrue? Who bears it, how much, and through what legal and/or technical mechanisms? What impacts does this have, whether on creators, platforms, or other stakeholders?

One place to start is to consider the kinds of risk borne by individual streamers working on established platforms. Traditionally, cultural industries are capital-intensive businesses. Even a low-budget indie movie or small digital game can cost six or seven figures to produce, while high-end productions routinely stretch into the hundreds of millions—amounts that few individuals can afford to bear. By contrast, advocates of online cultural production have emphasized its low barrier to entry, often favorably pulling on the rhetoric of democracy and creative independence in the process. And it is certainly true that one can easily stream to an audience of millions from one's bedroom using consumer-grade hardware. In practice, however, it is easy to understate the degree of investment that is required to sustain a career in live streaming. As live streaming has grown in popularity, so have production values for well-funded streamers. All things being equal, many audiences now expect streams with high-definition 1080p resolution at 60 frames per second, alongside high-quality audio and multiple camera setups. In rare cases, elite streamers build elaborate in-home studios reminiscent of daytime television soundstages. So, while it is undoubtedly true that a Twitch stream's production costs are considerably lower than those of traditional cultural industries, they are not as low a barrier as they might seem.

Existing research on the political economy of influencing has found that the majority of creators live highly precarious lives. To be sure, this externalization and individualization of risk is a feature of neoliberal organizing in general (Weil 2014) and is particularly acute with respect to platform labor (van Doorn 2017).[5] While many creators subscribe to ideas about "passionate work" and "doing what you love" in order to cast materially unappealing conditions as acceptable (or even desirable) (Duffy 2018), a robust body of journalistic and academic writing illustrates how the vast majority of creators, even among professionals, do not live glamorous lives. Moreover, many creators experience many of the risks of fame (stalking, harassment, privacy violations, etc.), but receive little in the way of protection.

All of this is undoubtedly true of live streamers. There's little doubt that live streamers lead economically precarious lives (Johnson and Woodcock 2019) and must contend with the constant threat of fraud and a largely unregulated industry that tolerates considerable amounts of grift. Moreover, live streamers are largely responsible for all of their own purchases, investing in significant and risky upstart costs that are not guaranteed to pay off financially (even if live streaming can be rewarding in other ways). Nor do live streamers receive much in the way of benefits from platforms. The "always online" dynamics of live streaming forces many full-time streamers to spend upward of sixty hours a week live, with every hour they are not on air leading to lost revenue in the form of unmade donations, unwatched ads, and lapsed subscriptions. Finally, live streamers often find themselves at the whims of capricious and contradictory content moderation choices that, in the extreme, can lock them out of their primary source of revenue.

At the same time, this risk is *generally* not shared by platform owners. Although an individual streamer may take a considerable loss after investing time and money in an unsuccessful live streaming career, this loss is felt far more acutely at an individual level than an institutional level. Platforms are very efficient at redistributing risk and responsibility downward and outward, a key dynamic in their drive toward centralization and monopolization (Pasquale 2016). Moreover, the policies that Twitch enacts regarding content moderation as part of a broader program of platform governance are often highly self-serving. For example, the company's compliance with Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) takedown requests and strikes means that the risk of streaming copyrighted music as part of a broadcast is not borne by the platform, but by individual streamers (Taylor 2018).

Likewise, attempts to keep the platform ad-friendly often dictate content standards in ways that magnify the existing power dynamics; for example, the advent of "hot tub streams" has inaugurated a new debate about the overregulation of women's bodies on Twitch.

Increasingly, however, streamers are not the only stakeholders in live streaming to bear the risk of broadcasting through a kind of overproduction. Prominent talent agencies, such as FaZe Clan, will sign large numbers of up-and-coming streamers. While only a few turn out to be major stars, their outsize success offsets the comparatively minor cost of signing streamers who do not grow in popularity. Similarly, Twitch provides access to its platform free to all potential streamers, incurring modest fixed and variable capital expenditures in the process but producing an enormous repertoire as a result. Only a handful of these streamers will turn out to be bona fide stars, of course, but the losses of minor and casual streamers are well worth the expense.

All that said, it is clear that there are some contexts in which established platforms take on considerable risk. In the late 2010s, as YouTube Gaming and Mixer emerged as competitors to Twitch, these services' parent companies (Alphabet, Microsoft, and Amazon, respectively) frequently entered bidding wars with streaming talent agencies like Loaded and FaZe Clan to secure exclusivity rights to popular streamers, deals that often stretched into tens of millions of dollars. Similarly, platforms have often found themselves paying for media rights to esports tournaments like Overwatch League, for which Twitch reportedly paid $90 million for two seasons of exclusivity. Such expenditures place considerable pressure on platform *owners* to recoup their investments, a situation similar to the legacy industries that they once sought to disrupt and very different from the political economy of other platforms. (Uber, of course, is not paying enormous exclusivity fees to drivers to stop them from joining Lyft.) Rather than this risk being manifested in the creation of a discrete product, however, this kind of investment lays claim to a future body of work that will, ideally, support future advertisements, donations, and subscriptions.

The exceptional exclusivity fees that elite streamers could demand in the late 2010s have settled considerably, especially following the shutdown of Mixer in 2020. Nevertheless, these kinds of deals are a reminder that while platform owners often attempt to externalize risk to dependents, they can rarely escape it entirely. In that, there are some conditions in which live streaming platforms have more in common with "business as usual" in the cultural industries and less in common with the financial arrangements on other labor platforms.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have introduced the cultural industries approach and what I believe it can offer to the study of live streaming. It is clear that live streaming constitutes some kind of cultural industry, insofar as live streamers are symbolic creators who produce social meaning. Thinking about the continuities between other cultural industries and live streaming provides a number of opportunities for new lines of research into live streaming, especially with respect to how streamers navigate the tensions between creativity and commerce and the differential distribution of risk in creative production.

Even so, when thinking about many of the phenomena that make cultural industries distinct from other sectors, such questions do not always translate easily to live streaming. This creates opportunities to rethink or add nuance to key assumptions in cultural industries research and how those assumptions do and don't change at a moment when digital platforms are becoming an increasingly powerful force in cultural production. At the same time, it is clear that as live streaming has developed from a commercial activity into a complex industry with multiple stakeholders, it has taken on many of the characteristics of legacy media industries that many once hoped that it would defy.

Notes

1. He was duly eliminated.

2. In this chapter, my focus is on Twitch, due to its outsize economic and cultural influence on the livestreaming market.

3. This section is indebted to Hesmondhalgh's historiography of cultural industries research.

4. This observation can help us make sense of why the Condé Nast publication *Teen Vogue* runs explainers on Karl Marx, or the Korean conglomerate CJ Entertainment funded and distributed the anticapitalist film *Parasite* (2019). Rather than do mental gymnastics to expose how these are secretly an instrument of the ruling class, we can simply point out that cultural industries are—and have long been—full of these kinds of contradictions.

5. At the same time, precarious work has been a norm in cultural industries for many decades due to oversupply and the gigcentric nature of many forms of cultural production.

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Real Life in Real Time

Live Streaming Culture

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