

Foreword: Broadcasting Our Lives, Broadcasting Ourselves

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It is now about a decade from when game live streaming first really caught my eye when, back in 2012, I was still living in Sweden and wrapping up a book on esports. Those early experiments in transforming private play into public entertainment have grown into a whole new genre of media that lives on a variety of worldwide platforms that host content 24/7. That trajectory of growth established before the pandemic-mode of early 2020 only accelerated as huge chunks of daily life went online. As so many people shifted their school and work lives to the internet, web cameras suddenly became hot commodities, complete with inflated prices. Recommendations for lighting systems or fancy mics, previously only used by streamers or “influencers,” started cropping up in everyday conversation. Some folks even sought out green screens to better handle their virtual backgrounds. While 2020 was a strange year for us all, the mainstreaming of live streaming—whether in a Zoom room or on Twitch—caught me a little off guard.

I should not have been surprised, of course. Sites like Twitch have their roots in early internet cam culture, where people experimented with broadcasting, or at least visually sharing, their life online to others (see chapter 1). The riveting, and at times disturbing, documentary *We Live in Public* chronicles how 1990s internet culture collided with art and entertainment to produce fascinating experiments in early web broadcasting, from one couple wiring their entire house with live cameras and constantly chatting with their viewers to a 100-person living space that streamed the often-dramatic lives of its inhabitants—think *Big Brother* without any filters and a heavy dose of art antics, all online.

In many ways, our current moment of streaming—where gaming is only one of a variety of activities that folks share—is a return to its roots. On any

given day of the week, we can now pretty easily watch live broadcasts of academic symposia, improv comedy shows, musicians and DJs (see chapter 2), cooking and crafting, and people just hanging out and chatting. Over the course of the pandemic, many of us also watched live streams of Black Lives Matter protests or the distressing assault on the US Capitol. As the editors of this volume note in the introduction, live streaming, be it from quasi-TV studios in the home or via mobile phones on the streets, is increasingly a site not only of entertainment and sociality, but of politics and struggle.

Of course, politics and struggle were always woven into streaming, even when it was simply gaming. The history of live streaming is not just about participatory and cocreative media, but also a place of exclusions and harassment, gatekeeping and regulation (see chapters 5, 6, and 8). And it has always been a place where the labor of users, whether in producing content or in moderating and managing communities, has been at stake. As so many have extended their lives online, both personal and professional, and turned to live streaming as a way to connect with others or share their work and play, the call for us to take yet another critical look at it is vital.

The labor and economic conditions around streaming continue to raise critical questions about a growing sector of the culture industry (see chapter 17). Over the years, the nascent professionalization of live streaming (or at least the hope of generating some financial support for your streaming endeavors) has continued to develop. The process of being allowed to make money off your streams by attaining “partner” status was originally somewhat opaque and the subject of endless community discussion. Although Twitch’s discretionary judgment remains a component of the process, the professionalization of streaming, or at least the aspirational rhetoric of such, has now been baked into the user interface (UI) of the broadcaster.

This sociotechnical circuit is important to pay attention to because it points to the ways that platforms weave in cultural and sociopolitical modalities. The “Insights” bar of the broadcaster UI allows access to various tools and analytic sites, operationalizing content and viewership in a way much more aligned with traditional broadcasting and its quantification. It scaffolds in hooks to conversations of “influencer reach,” revenue, marketing, audience demographics, and return on investment (ROI). It offers data to populate your pitch deck or to frame yourself to potential sponsors. And in a quasi-gamification fashion, the platform now delineates target goals for you on the “path” to affiliate or partner. Achievements like “What is

thy bidding?” that credit you for getting followers on your channel, or “The empire business,” which is unlocked after streaming 500 hours, seek to tap into an affective pull of achievement systems, but in the service of growth and monetization (Siutila 2018).

It is important to note that streamers who approach their channels with an eye toward professionalization have long utilized various analytics and have certainly set goals for themselves as a way of tracking their progress. That is not what is new. It is the uptake of this on the platform itself that I want to flag. As with so many aspects of gaming, the *Creator Dashboard* circa 2021 had taken emergent practices from the community and baked them into the formal product, amplifying the sensibility along the way and, in the most generous read, made transparent what was often implicit. Yet the integration of this orientation into the platform UI also provided a powerful signal to any user poking around the preferred frame of action in operation (in this case, a fairly instrumentalized form of engagement). The less generous read suggests a pipeline that funnels users into a set of often-grueling practices and an ongoing precarious labor structure (see chapter 18).

We would be remiss, however, if we flattened the story of contemporary live streaming to simply be about instrumentalization and monetization. Perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of fully understanding these spaces involves the ways that joy, community, and even care are also infused into them. It can be hard, of course, in the face of exclusions and harassments, serious issues around labor, and the commodification of experience not to lose sight of what often draws people to online life. It would be a mistake, though, in the service of much-needed critical accounts, to overlook the vibrancy of the communities and connections that people build into streaming spaces. Understanding the complex navigation of underlying structures requires nuanced research.

In some ways, my calling this out amplifies already powerful work happening within critical internet studies that does not dismiss pleasure, joy, or a sense of a vibrant collective, even on our most damaged platforms (see chapter 10). I am inspired by the work of scholars like André Brock (2020), Ray Fouché (2006), and Kishonna Gray (2020), to name just a few, who have so insightfully spoken to the creativity and adeptness of marginalized communities as they work with and over technology. As Brock (2020) argues, we cannot lose sight of “Black digital practices engendered by joy, sexuality, playfulness, anger, and politics” (37). We must find ways

to tell the full story with these platforms—one that can hold a sharp critical insight that unpacks the black box of the socioeconomic-technical assemblage, alongside an understanding of the lively meaning that people make.

The power of connecting with others and creating authentic moments has always been a part of live streaming, and telling this side of the story remains vital. Over the years, we have seen the work that many streamers who are committed to fostering positive spaces have undertaken (see chapter 20). From modeling inclusivity to building up robust forms of community management (through both teams of moderators and socializing their viewers), there is a rich history of carving out positive welcoming spaces on platforms we might otherwise often turn a fairly critical eye. This heterogeneity has to be better reckoned with and explored.

Perhaps one of the most interesting developments has been the move by some streamers who have long been subject to harassment and gatekeeping to not just be visible, but boost community building and appeal *through* otherwise marginalized identities (see chapters 9 and 12). A prime example of this is the Peer2Peer.Live site which was launched in March 2021. Developed by Steph Loehr, Irene Nieves, Sabrina Mack, and Lucia Everblack, with support from Trans Lifeline, the site's tagline "Identity is Content" speaks to a move to promote visibility and reclaim connection through identity.

At the time of Peer2Peer.Live's launch, Twitch, while having introduced a general tagging system in 2018, didn't allow streamers to tag their channels with "identity markers" beyond the fairly broad "LGBTQIA" label. Into the gap, this third-party site offered a broadcaster-generated system of tags (open-ended but vetted) for viewers to find communities of interest. As the press release for the site noted, "Trans Lifeline launched Peer2Peer.Live to fill gaps left by Twitch's lack of identity-based tagging that left minority streamers with limited to no discoverability options on the platform" (Trans Lifeline 2021).

Streamers could apply to the Peer2Peer.Live site for membership and, if approved, then tag their channel in various ways and boost discoverability through those designations. The stream would still be hosted on Twitch, but it also showed up on the Peer2Peer.Live site, which acted as an opt-in aggregator. Visitors to the site could click on varying tags, like "Deaf/HOH," "Black," "Bisexual," or "Muslim," to find streamers that have chosen to self-identify in various ways using whatever tags they chose. Multiple tags can be chosen (a technical nod to intersectionality). Another set of tags also lists

forms of accessibility that the channel might offer, such as American Sign Language (ASL) or closed captioning.

Peer2Peer.Live made material through infrastructure the fact that streamers themselves are a critical component of a broadcast. It also highlighted the power of affinity groups, particularly for those who might otherwise experience an unwelcoming environment online. As the developers wrote on the Values page, “We believe that connecting to community is a vital part of what it means to be human. . . . Peer2Peer.Live provides a broadcaster directory that helps content creators and viewers with marginalized identities connect to and empower one another” (Peer2Peer 2021). Stream content is rarely just about the broadcast of an artifact (a game) or a process (play, crafting, cooking). It is generally the interweaving of process *and* person that is vital. Sites like Peer2Peer.Live have taken the emergent community and identification practices that already were informally present in streaming and helped codify and amplify them.

Of course, Twitch knows how central identity is to streaming and has acknowledged this aspect of broadcasting, not least of which by cutting special deals with high-profile content producers or by increasingly promoting particular streamers during Black History or Pride events. The platform, however, has historically been hesitant to adopt it as a guiding principle extended to all users through specific platform features. What is notable, then, is how much calls for this feature originated from the very communities usually framed as being “protected” by not bolstering their visibility.

Yet, as Trans Lifeline noted in its press release, this framing may overlook the power of community as a form of safety and protection, “Trans Lifeline is hosting Peer2Peer.Live because we know the value of peer support. We know that having community prevents crises. People thrive in communities with shared experiences, and Twitch isn’t helping people find community” (Trans Lifeline 2021). While invisibility as a tactic has long been used by vulnerable communities when there is an absence of committed and sustained structural protection, it has profound shortcomings in the long term, both for individuals and society.

As with much of online life, users themselves stepped in to fill the gaps left by official developers and formal systems. Peer2Peer.Live tapped into the power and community-building possibilities of self-identification mechanisms as a form of positive visibility and discoverability on an often-saturated platform. And, as is often the case with user-generated

interventions, the formal platform itself finally caught up to where the community was headed.

Just a few months later, in May 2021, Twitch launched its own opt-in tagging system. Under the heading “Celebrate Yourself and Your Community with 350+ New Tags,” the site introduced tags “related to gender, sexual orientation, race, nationality, ability, mental health, and more” (Twitch 2021). It notably thanked the trans community for its “passion and persistence” in pursuing the feature and spoke of partnering with a number of LGBTQ+ organizations to try to make their system as inclusive as possible. To address concerns with potential harassment as a result of visibility, they linked to their Hateful Conduct and Harassment Policy, Community Guidelines, and moderation tools.

In both the case of the evolution of the UI for streamers Twitch itself has undertaken, and the launch of a third-party site like Peer2Peer.Live, we can see the historical roots of nascent user practices and how they get taken up, amplified, and iterated in various technological ways. It highlights how the work of streamers gets folded back into the platform or the culture broadly, and how these communities sit within larger flows of economics or systems of governance that they must contend with. This sociotechnical assemblage, ever evolving, ever shifting, and full of pushes and pulls, points to the continued need to keep researching, analyzing, and puzzling through stream culture—exactly the work that this valuable volume is doing.

What I saw in my earliest days of research, while still often present as crystalized bits lodged in the culture, is nonetheless always transforming and morphing. Streaming is never a fixed site, artifact, or set of practices. It requires ongoing attention, not to finally capture a settled story or chronicle a stabilized object, but to continue our critical inquiry into unpacking it. I am incredibly grateful to the myriad scholars who are continuing our collective investigation about this vibrant side of online life. This collection is sure to be a foundational part of that conversation.

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Live Streaming Culture

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