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Recasting Twitch: Livestreaming, Platforms, and New Frontiers in Digital Journalism

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ABSTRACT

Despite Twitch's dominant position in Western livestreaming markets, institutional journalists rarely produce content on the platform. This paper investigates how journalistic practices, cultures, business models, and institutions approach Twitch through three empirical sites: *The Washington Post's* experimentation with the app, left-leaning political influencer Hasan Piker, and the pro-QAnon 24/7 "news" channel, Patriots' Soapbox. The cases demonstrate how newsmaking on Twitch flouts traditional journalists' ideological and occupational boundaries, exploiting the platform's features and affordances to enroll the audience in a live broadcasting experience.

From political influencer Hasan Piker's raucous coverage of the January 6 US Capitol attacks to *The Washington Post's* (*WaPo*) unedited broadcast of President Biden's State of the Union address, the livestreaming platform Twitch represents an increasingly common form of news and information dissemination. This paper analyzes and identifies how Twitch's unique technical features, worker subjectivities and modes of interaction relate to news production and notions of occupational identity, public trust, imagined audience, and digital intermediaries, which inform contemporary scholarly debates around liveness. We argue that Twitch's combination of streamer/viewer engagement and business model produces a broadcast that complicates how legacy outlets assert authority and knowledge claims, especially by centralizing the relationship between the audience and content creators who synchronously and symbiotically parse news together.

Like other livestreaming services, the app combines video with a text-based chat room (or "Chat") in addition to social media hallmarks like "following," "liking," subscribing and sharing content, as well as creator tools (Partin 2020). Twitch encourages audiences to communicate with each other and the streamer live. The platform was

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an offshoot of Justin.tv, which was lauded for "unedited and immediate" (Lenzner 2014, 260) broadcasts by citizen reporters and activists, leading news-dominant sites YouTube and Facebook to offer similar resources (e.g., Ilan 2021). However, Twitch has a commanding market position outside of China with 1.645 billion hours of live video—primarily gameplay—produced monthly (Stephen 2020). Some daily streamers, including Piker, experiment with news, political coverage, and popular culture reporting including science, technology, and gaming. A contemporary forum for live discussion, young adults flock to Twitch for simultaneous entertainment and news/information consumption (Vázquez-Herrero, Negreira-Rey, and Sixto-García 2022).

To explore the ways Twitch is affecting journalistic practices, we conducted an inductive thematic analysis of broadcasts, archives, and ancillary content from three channels: *WaPo* represents traditional journalists' work with Twitch; left-leaning influencer Piker incorporates news into broader content creation; pro-QAnon 24/7 "news" station Patriots' Soapbox (PSB) features an ideological subculture's grassroots-driven newsmaking. Collectively, they manifest an evolving sense of liveness based around audience "co-scripting" (Ask, Spilker, and Hansen 2019) that provides a useful means for conveying information and engendering community, but is deeply embedded within and reliant upon a constellation of social media and entertainment platforms.

Literature Review

On Liveness and Livestreaming

As a livestreaming platform, Twitch is steeped in longstanding debates about liveness in media and journalistic production (van Es 2017). From the telegraph to television, liveness is critical in newsmakers' adoption of innovations and public understanding of newsmaking (e.g., Ilan 2021). Publications also capitalize on it by covering "breaking news." Researchers scrutinized varied types of media liveness, such as: simultaneous and consumer experiences; the conveying of instantaneous information (e.g., Nguyen 2021); the processing of time; and technological/material conditions for meting out liveness (Bucher 2020).

Each medium asserts "its significance through an appeal to the live" (Nguyen 2021, 987): television is credited with fostering a sense of togetherness around distant events (e.g., van Es 2017), while text-based social media engender "aliveness" through constantly scrolling updated feeds (Lupinacci 2021). Arguing that accounts of liveness tend to narrowly explore human experience (phenomenology), position within industry (rhetoric), or inherent essence (ontology), van Es (2017) elucidates how media industries, platforms and users produce and remediate novel modes of being live. Such disparate and interconnected "constellations of liveness" are embedded socially, economically and technologically in platforms and environments, and articulated between producers and consumers. Van Es' concept has been used to demonstrate how video services like Facebook Live (Nguyen 2021) and Twitch (Jacobs and Booth 2021) co-constructed unique forms of liveness.

Liveness is also a vital ingredient for why and how to do journalism. While ontologically associated with electronic broadcast (Guribye and Nyre 2017), digital video like Facebook Live exerted new pressures on newsmakers, creating hybridized subject

matter that blends information, opinion, and interpretation (Colussi and Rocha 2020). Broadcast television tried to normalize livestreaming into reporting and promotions (García-Perdomo 2021) and instituted new practices like making "runs" (Guribye and Nyre 2017, 1223)—or rushes to a location—on breaking events. Journalists are expected to "tinker" (1225) with these innovative modes of production, which weigh on newsroom budgets. Westlund and Ekström (2021) remark how producing live video online requires tacit knowledge and reappraisal of specific routines, with journalists coordinating around the broadcast, and a slate of different actors (e.g., news desk; mobile journalists), experienced in observing and breaking news events using smartphones, tactically initiating and committing to live events, sharing knowledge, recording and boosting their work. Liveness justifies what is considered "worthy" of coverage, by shifting conditions upon which journalists make knowledge claims (e.g., Ekström and Westlund 2019), along with the circumstances of seeking and valuing information they produce.

Livestreaming specifically affords engagement and communication between users and professionals through video and chat functions (e.g., Guo and Sun 2022), which meets journalists' goals to move beyond "imagined audiences" (Nelson 2021) or aspirational archetypes of the public. "[T]rust, legitimacy, and the ability to connect with communities seem to be fundamental journalistic aims that shape the adoption of digital tools and networks" (García-Perdomo 2021, 139), ideally to converse with readership (Ferrucci, Nelson, and Davis 2020). However, due to fragmentation and polarization of consumers (Nelson 2021), newsmakers paradoxically view their audience warily (e.g., Petre 2018) and favor offline interaction (Belair-Gagnon, Nelson, and Lewis 2019). Despite this, the broader dialogical relationship between audiences and livestreaming journalists is typified by a "high intensity yet short lived form of user engagement" (Martini 2018, 4045) centered around "watching and sharing" (4046) on social media. Artwick's (2018) analysis of Twitter's Periscope and Facebook Live found that livestreaming can add credibility to events by allowing broadcasters to interact with audiences. Livestreaming can also captivate viewers through "immersion, immediacy, interaction, and sociality" (Haimson and Tang 2017, 48). Thus, as liveness continues to develop through technologies like livestreaming, understanding the nuances of how it impacts journalists is increasingly necessary.

Journalistic Strangers and Digital Intermediaries

The occupational ideologies of "public service, objectivity, autonomy, immediacy, and ethics" (Deuze 2005), along with established practices and "boundary work" (Lewis 2012), codify and legitimate who is a journalist. Increasingly, "journalistic strangers" (Holton and Belair-Gagnon 2018) from outside of newsrooms, like those on livestreaming platforms, introduce "new ways of identifying what news is, how to deliver it more effectively and how to better engage with news audiences" (p. 72). Microbloggers on Instagram position their content within "service and advice" (Maares and Hanusch 2018) boundaries, even as they realize it may not correspond with traditional newsmaking. Perreault and Stanfield (2019) maintain that the increasing influence of lifestyle journalism is tied to audiences' expectations about professional roles, which can be incongruous with those of traditional media outlets. Thus, journalistic outsiders inform

and shape expectations, authority and knowledge claims of newsmakers, in part because of their expertise with novel innovations and relationship to audiences.

Beyond this, media outlets choose to use innovations like livestreaming based on affordability, potential profits, and the hope of attracting new demographics (Higgins-Dobney 2021). Economics are "baked" (Ryfe 2021) into practices ranging from pursuing story facticity to finding exclusive content. Digital innovations form journalistic values (Lewis and Westlund 2015) and tactics; for instance, mobile media costs, usability, and functionality gave rise to new conventions for user-generated content (Westlund 2013). Economic considerations regarding mobile technologies also affect core journalistic notions like "place." Smartphones introduced new material media, peripheral actors, advertisers, and relationships with audiences (Duffy et al. 2020). Thus, political economy and technocultural understanding of novel media directly shift perceptions of news components.

Social media platforms like Twitch position themselves as digital intermediaries for information sharing (Gillespie 2010) rather than gatekeepers (Russell 2019). Digital platforms link two or more users for myriad interactions—from the technical (e.g., Microsoft Windows for third-party software development) to economic (e.g., eBay to connect buyers and sellers)—while collecting data on those exchanges. This relationship reflects the scale to which platforms capitalize on user labor (Wood and Monahan 2019), depending on individuals and institutions to avidly produce and consume content, as well as maintain standards.

Theories, from "platformization" (Nieborg and Poell 2018) to "mechanisms of control" (van Es 2017, 159), examine this interrelationship. Underlying it is "contingency" (Nieborg and Poell 2018), in which creators depend on platforms for making, monetizing, and distributing content. For newsmakers, social media challenge journalists' view of their "profession and its institutional role" (Lewis and Molyneux 2018, 14), with content distribution control moving from publishers to audiences. Nielsen and Ganter (2018) highlight persistent tensions between immediate opportunities offered by platforms and existential worries over "editorial identity, access to user data, and central parts of" (1602) the intermediaries' revenue models. Digital platforms are influenced by corporate actors' interests, leading to an asymmetrical symbiosis (1613) where established news organizations have little room to leverage their cachet against social media behemoths.

Additionally, print publishers rely on digital intermediaries for viability even as reader distrust grows towards both social media platforms and journalism (Rashidian et al. 2019). News sites invest time and labor to maintain social media presences as these outlets become a primary way to disseminate news and reach audiences (Hase, Boczek, and Scharkow 2022), assigning the equivalent of mini-television crews to research, make and promote content, while susceptible to digital intermediaries' whims like haphazard income sharing deals (e.g., Bell and Owen 2017). Adapting to algorithmic shifts in content distribution and monetization (Rashidian et al. 2019), as well as the expenses required by video production (Meese and Hurcombe 2021), frustrates reporters and publishers.

In total, the literature points to the importance of liveness in news production. Even while impacted by socio-cultural and technical conditions, specific platforms

and contexts of live production deeply affect the ways by which newsmakers understand their daily practices, professional norms, relationship to other media makers, and the practicalities of innovation adoption. However, researchers do not often triangulate between these areas of interest, dissecting the interconnections created by constellations of liveness across occupational identity, platformization, epistemological practices and ideological/authoritative claims.

Along with the dearth of research on how entertainment-based livestreaming apps are used by newsmakers, Twitch is a useful site for study because it provides a means by which to track and connect how "constellations of liveness" affect journalistic practice, authority, platform adoption and identity. As a digital intermediary that is ubiquitous when it comes to contemporary video, Twitch is cultivating a version of live news and information dissemination by providing tools for broadcasters, journalistic strangers, and audiences to participate in Chat during breaking events. Streamers and viewers already come together on the platform to make sense of these moments, and creators successfully monetize their output (Partin 2020). Thus, the technical and economic conditions surrounding Twitch will inform its value to journalists. They may wish to take note of prospective revenues, incentives and tools, which affect how they occupationally and epistemologically translate "liveness" to users.

Therefore, the following aims to answer:

RQ$_1$: What are Twitch's key technical, economic, and cultural features surrounding liveness, as well as broadcasting news and information?

RQ$_2$: In what ways do these features affect Twitch's adoption by and practices of journalists and newsmakers?

Methods and Empirical Sites

Our review pinpoints criteria by which reporters and researchers can determine Twitch's journalistic value. The platform's avenues for immediate and active audience participation, together with a sense of liveness shaped by its socio-technical norms, favor simultaneous and community-driven live content, blazing a path for social media consumption with other platforms (e.g., Vázquez-Herrero, Negreira-Rey, and Sixto-García 2022). Given Twitch's integral place in the information landscape, how does it support live news and fashion journalistic practices, material, and news production?

To answer these questions, we analyzed three popular news producers on Twitch for more than a year, conducting an inductive thematic analysis to allow themes to emerge from our observation and notes without a priori assumptions (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002), while targeting our specific research questions (Braune and Clarke, 2012) on how journalistic values, content, practices, and live broadcasts are mediated and produced on Twitch. Such an exploratory method was useful for generating themes based on the nascency of and convoluted means by which journalistic material is presented on the platform (e.g., there is no Twitch "News" section). Team members coded notes looking for latent themes lying beneath the semantic surface of the observable data. After coding, we searched for patterned meanings and clustered and re-clustered codes in relation to our research questions. We then defined potential

themes, dropping codes deemed less relevant to the research (e.g., gamification). Finally, examples and descriptions were rendered to illustrate patterns. As is noted in this approach (e.g., Braune and Clarke, 2012; Nowell et al. 2017) our work was iterative, with team members frequently discussing findings (Glaser and Strauss 1999) relating back to relevant literature (e.g., journalism studies; platformization of cultural production) and gaps regarding audience, liveness, boundary work, journalistic inter-lopers, etc. To ensure trustworthiness, which is the goal of such qualitative research (Lincoln and Guba 1985), we not only sustained prolonged engagement and persistent observation, but confirmed credibility by comparing findings; engaging in triangulation at all phases of research, including peer debriefing during coding stages; diagramming of concepts; vetting themes by returning to our notes; and keeping an audit trail of discussions (e.g., Nowell et al. 2017).

Before discussing our findings, it is important to outline our sampling rationale. We selected three sites that were among the most popular news producers on Twitch at the time—*WaPo*, Hasan Piker, and PSB. However, our previous experience writing about Twitch gave us insights on the platform's subcultures, political influencers, and varying approaches to journalistic content, topics, values, and practices (e.g., Harris et al. 2023; Partin 2020). Each channel represented distinct modes of news production and dis-semination occurring on Twitch. *WaPo* was one of the only major U.S. institutional outlets experimenting with the platform. Political content creators are more common and superimpose their commentary over hard news for entertainment; Piker is a popular streamer on Twitch, considered the platform's de facto political commentator (Lorenz 2020). He strategically engages with Twitch's policies and fans to play the "visibility game," producing scathing takedowns which delight his audience (Cotter 2019). Finally, ideologically-driven media channels utilize news events to inspire grassroots activism; PSB strategically mimicked traditional broadcast journalism practices and visuals to spread misinformation, perpetuate QAnon conspiracies, and increase their perceived legitimacy (Marwick and Partin 2020). Previous research identifies both Piker and PSB as significant sources of political commentary and news production on Twitch, YouTube, Twitter, and other social media platforms (e.g., Marwick and Partin 2020). They also operate their channels differently; beyond *WaPo*'s legacy newsmaking model, Piker makes money as a content creator, and PSB is structured around grassroots fundraising.

These three empirical sites therefore offered a diverse field to determine how Twitch streamers engage in news production, along with valuable comparisons across factors, ranging from budgets to programming choices, audience engagement, and historical development. Their prominence along such vectors set them apart from either less notable or more casual news streamers on Twitch. Furthermore, at the time of our study, they regularly covered similar hard news and political topics in tandem (e.g., Capitol Riots; Donald Trump's first impeachment), while other political and news streamers might not be as consistent, which was valuable in allowing us to compare their practices and strategies. Finally, they illustrate challenges and oppor-tunities faced by different cultural producers generating journalistic content as well as how each streamer experimented, modified, or rejected journalistic ideologies and boundaries.

We monitored these channels daily from June 2020 through June 2021 to observe broadcasters over enough time to assess regular production patterns (including style,

tone, and layout) and reach saturation in terms of themes arising during broadcasts. Twitch streams are lengthy—often up to eight hours. Rather than an exhaustive review, a team member watched channels for around two hours per day, and we collectively watched during and after newsworthy events like the January 6 Insurrection. In total, this amounted to roughly 1,000 hours of viewing. We took extensive field notes (approximately two pages per session), supplementing observations with information garnered from broadcast screenshots, archives and across communities on other platforms (e.g., Twitter, Discord, YouTube).

Specifically, through *WaPo*'s Video on Demand (VOD) library, we accessed streams beginning with Mark Zuckerberg's congressional testimony in 2018 (@WashintonPost, 2018) through former President Trump's first impeachment in 2020. Reporters Libby Casey, Dave Weigel, and Gene Park hosted broadcasts mirroring cable news shows, where subject experts provided commentary. Casey and Weigel discussed clips from behind desks, while Park remained largely off-camera moderating Chat. The channel had two additional series: "Live with Libby" resembled a talk show, and "Playing Games with Politicians" featured U.S. Congressional Representatives like Matt Gaetz and Suzanne DelBene playing video games while fielding hosts' questions.

Secondly, we studied socialist political commentator Hasan Piker's channel. His broadcasts rely on existing journalistic coverage and followers to source the content. During our observations in 2020, Piker's streams took place in a hybrid office/bedroom where he spoke into a desk microphone while multitasking on the computer. His broadcast consisted of reacting to popular content, playing games, and a "news" segment where he editorialized on events like the U.S. Capitol riot in real time. Piker synchronously conversed with Chat during broadcasts.

Our final site drew from PSB's social media posts, VOD, and webpage. Proudly "politically incorrect," PSB offered hyper-partisan current events commentary, moderated by a rotating cast of "anchors." Eventually banned from multiple platforms, including Twitch, YouTube, and Facebook Live, it continued on services like D-Live. During our research period, Twitch streams were simulcast with YouTube, their primary platform and archive, with 90,000 total subscribers. An online community also contributed to broadcasts and theorized with on-air hosts *via* Chat.

We treated the concept "journalism" as a "boundary object" that "inhabit[s] several communities of practice and satisf[ies] the informational formational requirements of each of them" (Bowker and Star, 1999, 297). A boundary object is defined enough to be invoked by ideologically dissimilar communities yet can be adapted to specific needs and agendas. The term is useful for our sites, which contain producers who see themselves as doing "journalism" in different ways. However, we make no normative claims on what true journalism is, especially given the varied entrants (e.g., journalistic strangers, digital intermediaries) and genres (e.g., lifestyle) already mentioned. Rather, we focused on how these sites understood the profession.

Findings and Discussion

Five themes emerged regarding news production on Twitch: the approach to liveness, styles and formats, interaction with audience, professional identity and boundaries, and relationship to digital intermediaries.

Approach to Liveness

All channels we studied were concerned about liveness, yet interpreted "journalism" and produced live content differently. This aligns with van Es (2017) view that constellations of liveness are shaped by socio-technical circumstances, or fit platform-distinct modalities. For example, each streamer utilized Chat; however, PSB's anchors and Piker directly responded to viewers, whereas *WaPo* did not generally acknowledge commentary during broadcasts, except through an off-air moderator.

WaPo based its liveness in part on their footage, whether covering events through a C-SPAN-like feed or exclusive interviews. By contrast, PSB and Piker integrated pre-existing video clips, articles, Tweets, and YouTube videos, including those sourced from viewers. PSB's liveness stemmed from its always-on 24/7 broadcasts, segmented in hour "blocks" hosted by individuals spread across time zones. Piker's approach to liveness mirrored other Twitch influencers, who interact with their audiences in real time while keeping a regular schedule: beginning around 12:00 PM PST, and divided into political news, commentary on "influencer" drama, and gameplay. The pattern allowed audiences to tune into and contribute to preferred segments.

These approaches to liveness on Twitch are heterogeneous and based on each site's relationship to publishers, audiences, and digital intermediaries. *WaPo* relied on exclusivity in news coverage, a customary journalism business model (e.g., Ryfe 2021), while Piker featured a platform-dependent broadcast aligned with Twitch's norms. This disparity highlights the platform's versatility, which contains varied constellations of liveness (van Es 2017), founded in part on streamers' goals.

More broadly, liveness on Twitch is based on audiences routinely tuning into and interacting with creators. The platform encourages viewers to actively contribute during streams through Chat, which also becomes content to which hosts react aloud. This real time back-and-forth entertains users (Taylor 2018), and makes the experience feel more "alive." Different forms of live media produce specific claims to knowledge of what happened (e.g., Matheson & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020), contexts of justification, and ultimately audience acceptance of what is "true" (i.e., journalistic epistemologies: Ekström and Westlund 2019). On Twitch, the platform's technical and social infrastructure allows for "co-scripting," which blurs the lines between "designers, owners, content creators and users" (Ask, Spilker, and Hansen 2019). This creates a sense of community during live sessions, as poignantly reported on throughout COVID-19 lockdowns (Foxman 2022). Trust is therefore formed outside roles and expectations of newsmaking, casting Twitch creators and viewers as "strangers" from the news process who disseminate and analyze information simultaneously. These participants "know" what they know from live repartee, rather than authority or knowledge claims. Furthermore, the market force of Twitch means its distinct constellation of liveness broadly impacts livestreaming culture, affecting what content is deemed "normal" to produce.

Style and Format

Twitch producers generally record a variety of content, including gameplay, talk shows, and music. Genres overlap with personalities reviewing news while playing games.

The three different sites' styles and formats reflected this heterogeneity. *WaPo*'s Twitch stream echoed typical broadcast journalism; the channel aired congressional debates without commentary and minimal on-screen graphics, as well as other conventional formats ranging from visual grids of "talking heads" to the pundit-oriented "Live with Libby," (see Figure 1) where hosts editorialized from armchairs. Their most popular stream with roughly 1,000 concurrent views: "Playing with Politicians" (see Figure 2)
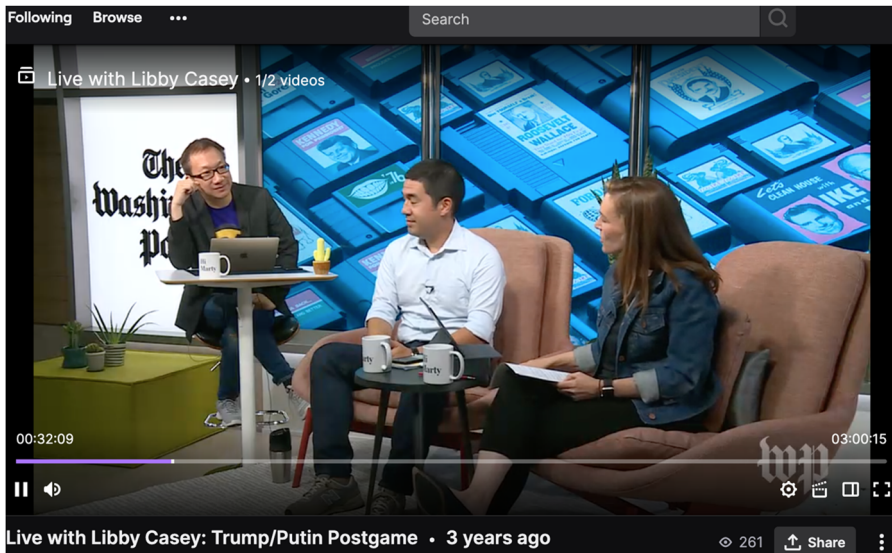
Figure 1. *The Washington Post's* "Live with Libby" format. Retrieved from: https://www.twitch.tv/washingtonpost.

Figure 2. *The Washington Post's* "Playing Games with Politicians" format featuring Matt Gaetz. (July 19, 2018). Retrieved from: https://www.twitch.tv/washingtonpost.

did diverge stylistically and was modeled after "Let's Play" videos. However, only six of the channel's 135 broadcasts were special features (i.e., "Playing Games with Politicians," "Live with Libby"), with the rest defaulting to customary genres. Their use exhibits how newsmakers bring older formats and styles to emerging media. This process can "normalize" the platform: journalists, for instance, brought skills from Twitter to Instagram (Perreault and Hanusch 2023).

By contrast, Piker and PSB's formats diverged from conventional news media. PSB derived elements from cable news; beyond the 24-hour broadcast schedule, they included "anchors" interpreting news, often selecting videos with audience aid. They also pushed stories to "correspondents" and made use of a scrolling chyron. However, their low production budget lent a "Do-It-Yourself" aesthetic to shows. They embraced some Twitch layout norms, including multiple video "panels" showing Chat, tweets from Donald Trump, and "drops" from QAnon conspirators (see Figure 3).

Piker's style aligned with social media feeds, where news intermingles with other communication and entertainment. Displaying and opining about news, trending videos, and memes, his stream's layout paralleled Twitch gamers: a computer desktop showing gameplay or browsing news; video of Piker seated with headphones and a microphone; and a Chat window (e.g., Lorenz 2020).

The liveness fostered by Twitch influenced style choices, as all channels built content around Chat. Twitch's liveness stems from producers' and consumers' simultaneous contributions, with each channel eschewing on-the-ground investigations for streamer commentary and audience interaction. The result is akin to lifestyle journalism in terms of offering opinions (e.g., Perreault and Stanfield 2019) and integrating news with entertainment. Twitch's news style is in line with other forms of social media news dissemination, setting it at the "margins of the journalistic field" (Maares and Hanusch 2018, 274). Twitch's liveness may sway newsmakers, just as micro-blogger and influencer styles may filter to more established journalistic modes.
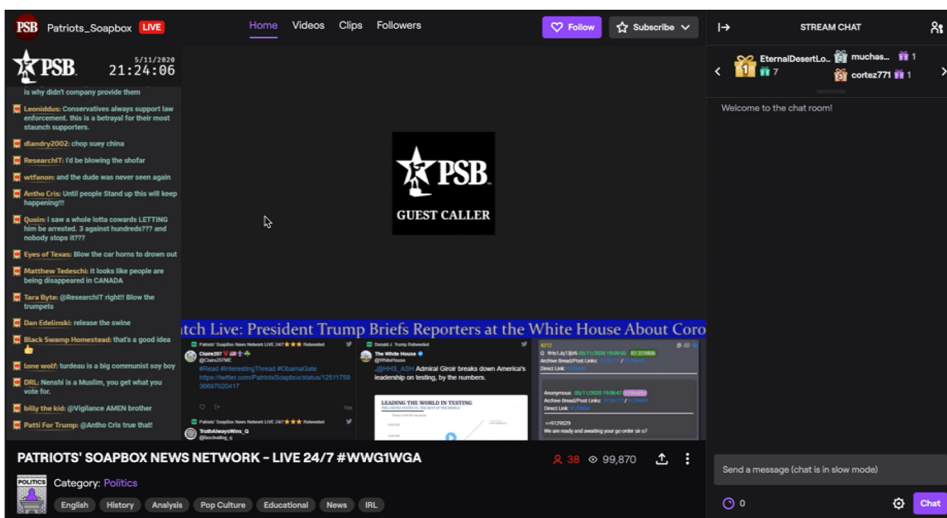

Figure 3. PSB's layout includes tweets, a news chyron, and a pseudonymous chatbox. Retrieved from https://www.twitch.tv/patriots_soapbox.

Professional Identity and Boundaries

Each site demonstrated awareness of, yet avoided, occupational practices, norms, and ideologies of "traditional" journalism. *WaPo* hewed most to legacy news; for "talking head" style discussions, the hosts' tone—descriptive and lacking ideological slant—reflected the "apolitical" stance of most mainstream coverage. Similarly, the attire, stage setup, and efforts to present multiple viewpoints reflected TV archetypes. The "Playing Games with Politicians" segment, however, favored a regular and more ad-hoc Twitch activity, with hosts answering guests' questions, sharing opinions and only occasionally looking at interviewees while distracted by gameplay. Off-screen, Park was more casual and subjective in Chat (See Figure 4). *WaPo* reporters tied their occupational identity to institutional outlets, circumscribing stricter boundaries around their work based on traditional practices (Maares and Hanusch 2018) as well as discursively constructing what qualifies as within journalistic purview (Lewis 2012)—for example, excluding their more institutionally-oriented anchors from engaging with Chat, despite its importance to Twitch.

While Piker displayed familiarity with journalism mechanics—including sourcing, framing, and objectivity—these practices were critiqued as "mainstream" news' efforts to "manufacture consent" around elite ideas. Piker deployed an unapologetic ideological viewpoint and rhetorical style in which he referred to elderly senators as "vampires" and Trump supporters as "hogs." Piker's vulgarity seemed to increase his perceived authenticity: "People came to me because they wanted to hear a point of view—and maybe not a manicured point of view either, but an honest point of view" (Lorenz 2020). Remixing audience-sourced material in real time, a casually-dressed Piker firmly positioned himself outside journalistic traditions.

Though PSB replicated some mainstream news norms, they opposed legacy institutions, a common target of right-wing social media producers (Lewis 2020). Their website stated that mainstream media's "[f]omenting racial hatred is not 'news' but irresponsible and reckless" (Writer 2021). PSB differentiated itself from what it perceived as "corrupt" occupational ideologies to validate its "true" journalism.

Beyond ideological claims, streamers also breached journalistic boundaries and broadcast formats. By disassociating from conventions, they coursed between lifestyle journalism, political commentary, and entertainment. Each streamer set novel boundaries of what qualified as reportorial work and what subject matter fell within their ideological viewpoint. Contrary to being "gatekeepers" of public information, they assumed a "navigator" role, sifting through and curating news with their audience. While news influencers may take journalistic roles and respect boundaries on other social media platforms (e.g., Maares and Hanusch 2018), streamers like PSB and Piker fostered liveness by constantly negotiating boundaries and authority with viewers while broadcasting. Furthermore, community members eagerly participated in this multipurpose consumption; they co-scripted (Ask, Spilker, and Hansen 2019) news and information boundaries, adding what they saw fit.

This interactive positioning and relaxed style dovetailed, with the streamers embracing identities as "journalistic strangers." *WaPo* resembled Holton and Belair-Gagnon's (2018) "intraloper" status; as their company is a mainstream news organization, their job was to experiment with innovation. The broadcasts, however, underscore the
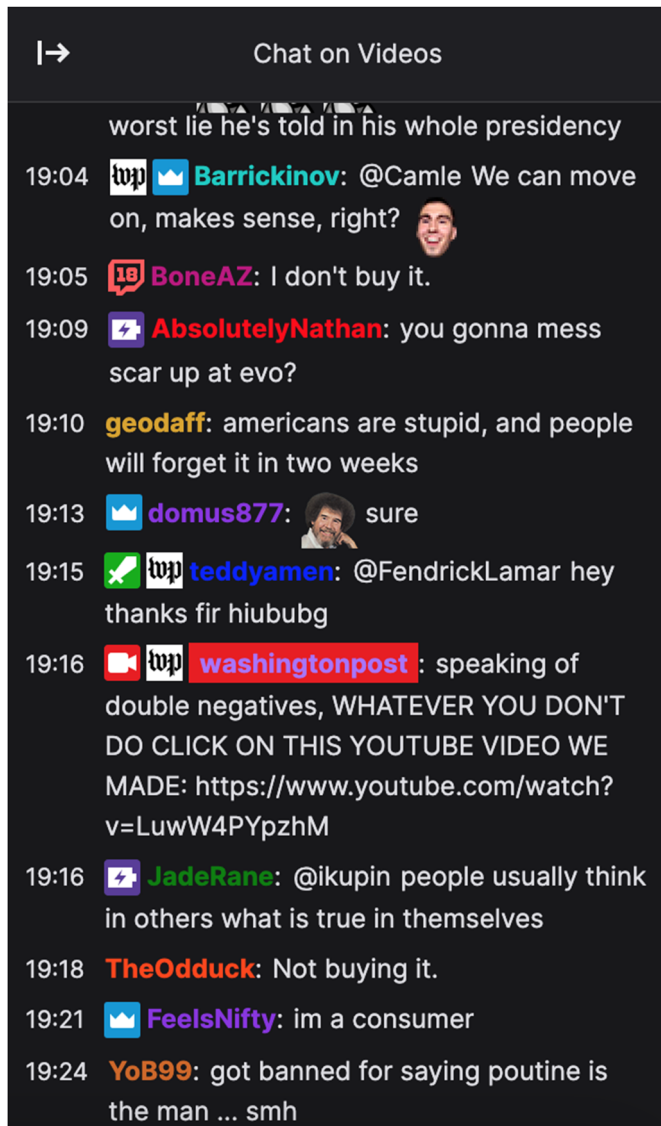
Figure 4. Example of *The Washington Post* interacting with chat (at 19:16 mark). Retrieved from: https://www.twitch.tv/washingtonpost

excessive labor intralopers expend in trial and error (e.g., Ilan 2022), as they ran Twitch while conducting other reportorial duties. Both Piker and PSB championed being "explicit interlopers," which may help explain why journalists tend to view streamers more skeptically as "entertainers" (Foxman 2022) doing "soft" reporting. Piker described his work as "daycare" to "educate" his audience; likewise, PSB promoted their brand of "authenticity" (Lewis 2020). PSB and Piker's stances facilitated their dismissal of "mainstream" coverage. By blurring their identity between journalist and participant on social platforms (Holton and Belair-Gagnon 2018), they more effectively enthralled their audiences. These "strangers" use emerging technologies like Twitch to cover news

without identifying as journalists (p. 74), and their version of live participation garners media attention (Harris et al. 2023).

Interaction with Audience

Given the appeal of live audience interaction on Twitch (Taylor 2018), our channels acknowledged its centrality. Still, *WaPo* chose to disaggregate video presentation from Chat. Park and others monitored and responded to viewers, clearly recognizing Chat's value, but not engaging on-air. This response contradicts the type of audience involvement seen in other studies, which emphasize co-scripting liveness (e.g., Ask, Spilker, and Hansen 2019).

For Piker, audience interaction acted as a collaborative feedback loop. Viewers sourced leads, social media posts, and memes, or posed questions that he used as on-air content. These exchanges then asynchronously continued to other platforms, especially Twitter. The chance of having a comment recognized gave users a reason to watch the channel live. Such interplay is not only popular on Twitch but also offers revenue sources for streamers (Johnson and Woodcock, 2019). The service's political economy lends itself to liveness based upon acquiring return customers who can pay in-stream and monthly fees (e.g., Partin 2020).

As promoted in the channel's motto—"You are the news now"—audience interaction was a major component of PSB broadcasts. Consistent with other conservative media studies (e.g., Tripodi 2018), we observed "anchors" commentate on mainstream and hyper-partisan sources. Like Piker's channel, audience members contributed theories behind events and links to notable articles, social media posts, videos and other media via Chat, Discord server, or social media. Moreover, fans became a font of labor insofar as they were occasionally recruited to be channel hosts. The audience's actions positioned them as media consumers and potential producers while also affirming shared values with PSB.

Altogether, the channels' activities typify practices of engagement that flourish on Twitch. Audiences count on synchronous intimate interactivity cultivated by streamers through a multimodal approach that incurs significant time and effort to maintain interest and differs from asynchronous modes of professional newsmaking. Rather than "imagined," audiences energetically participated through Chat. And while their professional standards and identity differed, each stream encouraged dialogue with viewers. *WaPo* had an off-screen journalist respond in Chat; Piker verbally replied; and PSB even enlisted audience members as on-air personalities. Consequently, engaging directly with the audience was not a byproduct of online posts, but a defining and expected feature.

Liveness was shaped by the audience and contingent on their support (e.g., van Es 2017). Viewers validated the occupational and ideological identity of the streamers. This was evident with Piker and PSB, where Chat responses and clips were used for content, often with the host's affirmation. This cycle of viewer effort and host approval created an ideologically-aligned, symbiotic relationship, where streamers worked off theories and views of the audience and vice versa, blurring occupational boundaries. This reciprocity makes media events on Twitch "meaningful" and amplifies how viewers experience a stream with others (Jacobs and Booth 2021). The audience's lively participation

in Chat can have direct effects and lead to political action like "ratioing" (Harris et al. 2023)—inundating a target's social media posts with contrary remarks—that add narrative structures to news events. When journalists attempted to be transactional or formal (as with *WaPo*), it countered expectations for immediate (verbal) feedback. Compared to print journalism which relies on clicks and share metrics for success, synchronous livestreaming allows real time reaction from streamers, which can lead to seemingly more authentic experiences. However, this form of engagement, while it makes audiences integral in the news process, embraces journalistic strangers (Holton and Belair-Gagnon 2018) whose relationship to liveness and journalism is different from that of reporters, as exemplified by PSB's anti-mainstream media ideology, Piker's critique of news pundits, and Gene Park's exclusion from the on-screen video frame.

Digital Intermediaries

Issues surrounding Twitch as an intermediary were illustrated by how streamers chose to produce and support broadcasts in the service's complex economy. The platform's regulatory and financial prerogatives affected all producers, who depended on Twitch and other affiliated apps for viability. Twitch is embroiled in the political economy of digital intermediaries, dependent on multiple "sides" (Nieborg and Poell 2018, 4277) including streamers, audiences, sponsors, and agencies. Creators generate revenue through subscriptions, cash, and "Bits" (Twitch's virtual currency), donations, advertisements, and exclusive contracts. These revenue streams inform the entire service, from production choices to community standards to interactions between broadcasters and users. In short, platform logic shapes the liveness on Twitch, as with other social media (e.g., van Es 2017).

WaPo largely renounced offered features, bypassing the "Bits" system and third-party tools because "*The Washington Post* doesn't accept donations. Bits feel very close to a donation. We'd ask you don't use them for our streams—understanding, of course, that this makes us unlike other channels" (About WashingtonPost, 2018). While they instituted Twitch subscriptions at $5, $10, or $25 a month to avoid advertisements, *WaPo's* choice separated it from other channels. Their perspective evinced tensions that come with using digital intermediaries, where institutional outlets must counterbalance practical concerns with operational and economic opportunities (e.g., Nielsen and Ganter 2018). Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy (2022) note the strength of legacy news organizations who can capitalize on national brand recognition for support, while smaller (and born-digital) organizations struggle in platform environments. In short, *WaPo* could afford to experiment with Twitch while smaller outlets might not have the organizational heft to do so.

PSB and Piker welcomed Twitch's payment options: PSB accepted "Bits" and directed viewers to buy merchandise or donate. If done live, donors received happy birthday "shoutouts" or recitations of pet conspiracy theories. PSB also promoted subscriptions through third-party service Patreon, which had membership tiers from $1 to $40 per month. Piker, as one of the platform's most successful streamers with 1.6 million followers (during our research) monetized his site through "Bits," subscriptions, merchandise, and advertising. Given his clout, he leveraged benefits like new emotes for subscribers and ad-breaks reduced to "top of the hour" 60-second spots.

These manifold money-making options make it difficult to disentangle platform finances from content. On Twitch, platformization requires those most successful to also be most contingent to platform expectations. Economics also directs viewers and streamers' conceptions of liveness; native streamers recognize Bits and donations on-screen while constructing routines and content to sustain value. Platformization takes shape through economics, infrastructural development and governance, which manifests in rules, guidelines and norms that inform business models and access (Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy 2022, 6), and ultimately content. Scholars express concern about how economics and infrastructural control contribute to asymmetrical relationships between platforms that do not need journalists and publishers who depend upon them (Nielsen and Ganter 2018). PSB and Piker provide clear examples of how monetization and rules also mutually fashion practices and content. Indeed, streamers depend on Twitch beyond finances. For instance, the company's Terms of Service and Community Guidelines forbid certain content, such as depictions of violence and death (Twitch.tv—Community Guidelines, n.d.). In other words, platform standards structure messaging rather than professional norms. To avoid banishment and income loss, streamers customize their broadcasts around these agreements and review recorded material before it airs.

PSB and Piker also diversified their revenue streams across multiple platforms. They posted YouTube videos, tweets, and continued conversations on Discord. Followers participated as Twitch discussions transitioned to other services, further reinforcing streamers' popularity and community ties. As such, interoperable platforms are crucial for increasing success, which requires streamers to work within the strictures of each platform and depend on a network of connected material to achieve it. This complicates the lives of institutional journalists, who must not only onboard and manage coverage on sites like Twitch, but also contend with standards and norms based on a platform oriented toward interoperability with other social media and entertainment. Overall, the platform asserted influence over newsmakers who expended significant effort to mold content and practice, especially compared to news-focused applications.

New Constellations

The themes that emerged from our study inform each other. Interactions with audiences foster a sense of liveness dependent upon Twitch as a digital intermediary, which affected each streamers' professional boundaries and identity. As van Es (2017) suggests, a novel "constellation of liveness" surrounds the platform, driven by technocultural and economic underpinnings.

This constellation centralizes the audience's pivotal role in developing and producing news. Just as mobile media expanded journalists' ability to break live news from a specific place and time (e.g., Duffy et al. 2020), it is audiences' regular attendance and symbiotic relationship with a streamer, along with how they adapt content to viewer response, that imparts a sense of being "live" on Twitch. Liveness is tailored around co-scripted (Ask, Spilker, and Hansen 2019) news events. The audience impacted all themes, most obviously in the routines and regularity of broadcasts, whose liveness resembles 20th-century "tuning in" to radio or television and is equivalent to a "call-in" show. Streamers and viewers collectively went through the news with the latter

supplying hours of textual content for the former's use. What's more, Twitch's economic prerogatives provide incentives for streamers to interact this way as Bits, advertisements and subscriptions increase revenue and are contributed in the moment. In this way, Twitch's political economy supports a co-scripted sense of liveness.

Streamers' connections with viewers seem a far cry from the aspirational "imagined audience" of broadcast and print news, especially since PSB and Piker frequently incorporated their audiences' feedback into coverage and narratives by responding to comments and questions. This practice provides a source for sharing common cultural viewpoints and entertainment, but forges their "explicit interloper" position against "traditional" news. Interlopers do not need to integrate themselves into newsrooms, and thus accede to their occupational boundaries (Holton and Belair-Gagnon 2018). They also make the most of distributing and producing news across various social media (e.g., Hase, Boczek, and Scharkow 2022). Their work shows how news and information is disseminated *via* platforms and spawns a mode of liveness in keeping with this environment.

These streams also feature a "constellation" of digital intermediaries. Much of what PSB and Piker presented were clips and messages drawn from other social media. Not only does this relationship represent the "contingency" (Nieborg and Poell 2018) and interoperability that are hallmarks for digital platforms, but it also requires streamers to adopt a constellation of norms, restrictions and regulations tied to each, which affect their productions. For instance, news and related commentary were entwined with entertainment in all cases. At *WaPo*, this manifested in "Live with Libby" and "Playing Games with Politicians." At PSB and Piker's channels, the economics of social media and entertainment were "baked" (Ryfe 2021) into practices, such as commenting on Tweets or YouTube videos. However, this constellation of digital intermediaries shines light on emerging standards of news built from repurposed, existing content that streamers and audiences parse together. The financial and occupational challenges that accompany livestreaming often force journalists to work within digital intermediaries' and influencers' constraints; partner with their audiences; and accept tools and communities immersed in the economics and governance of the broader platform ecosystem. Digital intermediaries therefore play a primary role both in distributing news and configuring a constellation of liveness built in opposition to journalism's normative economics, broadcast and occupational boundaries which favor centralizing knowledge claims, finances, and technology within newsrooms.

Conclusion

This research examined how Twitch is used as a news platform. Relevant literature placed Twitch within discourses regarding digital journalism and reimagination of liveness in reportage. Our exploratory inductive thematic analysis of three channels revealed how the platform's version of livestreaming fosters liveness through a symbiotic relationship of information sharing with the audience. An innovative and platform-dependent form of journalism exists on Twitch that not only monetizes direct audience engagement, but also distinguishes streamers' work from legacy broadcast and print outlets. Such findings signal novel relationships between livestreaming,

entertainment, and reporting. Livestreaming on Twitch affords robust modes of engagement with the public, but requires effort and commitment to being a "journalistic stranger" to both thrive in popularity and earnings.

As our analysis is confined to U.S.-based news production on Twitch and three sample channels, further research should consider news production on Twitch and similar platforms (e.g., DouYu) in other countries, especially as other outlets (e.g., Sky News) broadcast on the site; comparative work is also warranted. *WaPo*, PSB, and Piker are not representative of all Twitch newsmaking, which is home to countless streamers sharing information about video games, comic books, finances, and other audience interests. Furthermore, since this research, Twitch content creators continuously shift their styles and approaches; for instance making use of tropes and memes on rising platforms like TikTok. Consequently, there is room for future inquiry into other formats for news production, as well as perceptions of Twitch news producers' own boundary work and epistemological claims. This article focused on streamers making political news and commentary, but future work could expand to other channels, especially given the relevance of lifestyle journalism in assessments of journalistic strangers and content creators encroaching news environs. Especially since our work focused on established outlets, understanding those beginning to use Twitch for news dissemination would shed further light on how they relate to journalistic identity and production.

Studying livestreaming on Twitch presents various methodological and analytical challenges when broadcasts are ephemeral and not consistently archived. Furthermore, as represented by PSB's permanent site ban, researchers need deep familiarity with Twitch's news landscape to conduct rigorous analyses in a timely manner. We viewed, compiled, and compared extensive field notes from broadcasts that were central to our analysis; it was through discussions and notes triangulation during regular meetings that we reached trustworthy findings. That stated, studies of specific story types (e.g., advice, interview) and events (e.g., January 6 riots) would add significantly to future research.

The form of liveness developed on Twitch is most notable in how antithetical it is to traditional modes of reporting. To legacy outlets, the platform's symbiotic mode of liveness makes little sense at face value: it demands significant labor; complicates covering "breaking news" in the field due to expected audience interaction; and does not make it easy to assert authority. At the same time, this mode of liveness' ubiquity cannot be denied. Innumerable people regularly "tune in" to Twitch for daily information, and creators are rising stars. This form of live journalism is "normalizing" (Perreault and Hanusch 2023) as other modes of broadcast fade in popularity.

Twitch could be a boon to legacy news organizations, not only because of its relative affordability but also the additional income and engagement from extended conversations across platforms. Early investment and scrutiny of news production on Twitch will enable journalists to intervene and embrace new technologies and practices that are increasingly important to build public trust, while simultaneously providing scrupulous alternatives to those who may repudiate their ideological or professional norms.

As a final provocation, we encourage both institutional journalists and scholars to weigh the potential value of these and other social/entertainment spaces (e.g., TikTok, Discord). Some creators achieved financial viability with meager staff and equipment compared to standard newsrooms: Piker grosses around $65,000 a month with a relatively low-cost operation and small team of content moderators (Julian 2021). Decades of studies show how disruptive digital technology has been to journalists and how mobile media recast the current news environment (e.g., Ekström and Westlund 2019). We see similar concerns with Twitch, particularly pertaining to live and broadcast news. The platform represents a generational shift in what will be considered "live" and how it will be produced, focusing on community-driven news and information dissemination.

Disclosure Statement

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