'Live' and a leftist: Twitch, political livestreaming, and Hasan Piker

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Abstract

Leftist political livestreaming has become an increasingly visible subset of Twitch.tv content, and internet livestreaming content generally, with Hasan 'hasanabi' Piker the most prominent among content creators in this new genre. This thesis aims to understand how leftist political livestreaming fits into a historical lineage of partisan political broadcasting, from talk radio to present day; structures labor and generates income; and how its programming engages its audience through its use of technological affordances, collective affect, and an integrated materialist analysis.

In the first chapter I trace the lineage of Twitch's political streams. I synthesize previous literature beginning with right wing talk radio stars like Rush Limbaugh, on through television political media, liberal infotainment, online gaming, and online radicalism. With this context I situate Piker and other leftist political livestreamers in historical context, outlining the cultural and technical affordances they draw from legacy media. Alongside this, I also describe the novel adaptations both they and the format of livestreaming introduce to political media.

In the second chapter I take a political economic approach to political livestreaming. Drawing on statements of streamers, public-facing company policy, trade blogs, etc. – I first break down the way that both streamer and audience labor are configured on the platform. Building from that, I analyze how Twitch operates as a payment processor, handling and incentivizing transactions between audiences and content creators. And finally, I discuss how Twitch is able to exert political power over its users by gatekeeping their income, producing a chilling effect, which affects political streamers' coverage.

In the third chapter, I describe the experience of a Twitch stream on Piker's channel using mixed methods. Combining autoethnography, the walkthrough method, and computational text analysis; I describe the programming of the stream's content itself and its phenomenological and affective dimensions. I use this description to show how political discourse is shaped and received by sides of the streams' communicative circuit.

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Introduction: Today's Twitch

0.1 An extremely online media event

"The Government Of Trinidad And Tobago Has Responded To Nicki Minaj's Claim About A Cousin's Friend's Swollen Testicles" read a headline on the afternoon of September 15th 2021 (Hernandez 2021). As Twitter users might say: *there's a lot to unpack here*.

   What happened was, in brief: while tweeting about why she would not be attending the 2021 Met Gala, popular rapper Nicki Minaj said that she had not yet received the COVID-19 vaccine, because a friend of her Trinidadian cousin had received the it, and that he had been rendered impotent and his testicles had swollen to an unnatural size as a side-effect – which caused his then-fiancée to call off their imminent wedding (Minaj 2021a). The bizarre story took hold of mainstream media outlets (Newsbeat 2021; Sun and Harmon 2021; Legaspi 2021; Pietsch and Suliman 2021). It combined multiple elements commonly found in today's most-shared news coverage: a celebrity, a hook seemingly stranger-than-fiction, and a highly polarizing political issue which invites readers to pick a side and easily post their opinions online. The media clip which found the most traction was Fox anchor Tucker Carlson's coverage, on his popular evening program *Tucker Carlson Tonight* – in which he said:

> "…it's not anything to do with the physical effect of the vaccine that makes our political class mad, it's the last part of Nicki Minaj's tweet that enrages them. The part where she says you should pray on it, make the decision yourself like a free human being and quote, 'don't be bullied.' So our media and public health officials didn't like this because they make their livings bullying people, so they couldn't let it stand."
>
> *(Carlson 2021)*

At least, that's what followers of Minaj on Twitter saw him say, when she posted a clip of his show in which he said that along with a single bull's eye emoji. Minaj did, in fact, tell her followers to "pray on" the issue of getting vaccinated, and to make their own decision – but only after saying that she would get it "once I feel I've done enough research" (Minaj 2021b).

   It was after she posted the clip from *Tucker Carlson Tonight* that my person-of-interest in this thesis finally arrives on the scene, inciting a Twitter trend and new burst of commentary with his contribution to the ongoing conversation. Hasan Piker, a 30 year old socialist journalist-turned-Twitch livestream political personality, who first gained prominence online for his debates with right-wing pundits, replied to her tweet with a simple, snarky message: "you know he's a white nationalist right?" (Piker 2021g).

   Briefly, Piker's comment 'ratio'd' Minaj – meaning that his reply garnered more 'likes' and positive interaction than her original post. Minaj, herself touting a well-known combative online persona, quote retweeted Piker with a sarcastic quip:
"Right. I can't speak to, agree with, even look at someone from a particular political party. Ppl aren't human any more. If you're black & a Democrat tells u to shove marbles

up ur ass, you simply have to. If another party tells u to look out for that bus, stand there & get hit" (Minaj 2021d).

To which Piker spiked back a comment criticizing both Republicans and Democrats, stating that Carlson himself was vaccinated, and sharing a video of Carlson defending "white replacement theory" – a far right, white nationalist conspiracy theory which posits that non-white people are intentionally trying to "replace" "white people" and "white culture"[1] (Piker 2021f).

Piker was doomed as soon as Minaj replied to him, of course. Her much larger fanbase, known online as "Barbz," are as combative as their icon – and immediately jumped to her defense. What ended up being circulated by Barbz, as the primary evidence of Piker's argument's invalidity, was an artifact which could only really have been generated by a live/streamer: a screenshot of his process of drafting the reply to her quote tweet of him on his stream. In real time, an audience of around 30,000 ("HasanAbi - Stream Sep 15, 2021" 2021) watched him write out an initial response:

> "i'm telling you, tucker carlson wouldn't even let you on the bus. let alone the back of it. but here you are reducing it to simple[–]"
>
> *(Piker 2021e)*

There's no way to know what the end of this draft tweet would have been. Piker cut himself off while writing it, heeding advice from his audience given through Twitch's chat function that the rhetoric he was using could be easily misconstrued. Hundreds of messages and emotes from viewers, telling him in real time that what he was typing would not be received well. Instead, he opted for the more tempered response (Piker 2021e).

Some members of the audience posted a screenshot from his video stream of the draft tweet which Barbz then latched onto, causing "Hasan" to trend for hours on Twitter. Taken out of both the procedural context of Piker's Twitch stream and the cultural context of his community, this unfinished retort can be read as a joke about segregated busses, at the expense of Minaj. Indeed, Twitch users – and users of online spaces where video game players congregate more generally – are not known for their antiracist politics. As Piker would argue in his half-apology the next day, however, it was anything but a joke: he was making the point that Carlson advocates for racist and specifically anti-Black policies regularly, peddles in conspiracist white ethnic cleansing narratives, and would likely advocate for segregation.

After the initial confrontation, mainstream outlets picked up the story, quoting both Minaj and Piker (Di Placido 2021; Montgomery 2021). Twitter temporarily suspended Minaj's account, which some users jokingly attributed to Piker. Minaj held an Instagram livestream in which she monologued about how she was being censored by Twitter for "ask[ing] questions" (Minaj 2021c) – keep in mind this is about COVID-19 vaccinations, in September of 2021. The Trinidadian government held a press conference about it

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[1] I have put quotation marks around these phrases to underscore just how contemptable any of each of them is, and how dubious the claims they represent are. "White replacement," "great replacement," "white genocide," and their synonyms are common terms in the conspiracy-minded European and American right-wing. These have found new prominence following the Trump administration's victory in 2016, especially since the cultural ascendance of Qanon (see: Cosentino 2020).

after conducting an investigation which, unsurprisingly, found no evidence of testicular swelling as a side effect of COVID-19 vaccines (Hernandez 2021). Within several days the whole ordeal had become little more than the folkloric joke-of-the-week online, in which Minaj's friend's cousin's testicles had swollen up, symptoms consistent with a chlamydia infection (Newsbeat 2021), which his fiancée likely recognized as such and subsequently broke off their wedding, suspecting infidelity. To the general public, the Tucker Carlson tangent ultimately became a footnote in the larger meme, but for members of Piker's audience both it and his prods at Minaj over it, reverberated as an in-joke – generating memes and edited fan-videos of their own.

This media incident, as odd and convoluted as it is on paper, demonstrates how news and politics happens in increasingly bizarre and multi-directional ways online. For my purposes, it is also a valuable and demonstrative chain of events which demonstrates the intersection at which Twitch and new media political commentators like Piker specifically sit. At once they are "influencer" media personalities, political commentators, and media producers who fuse elements of old broadcast formats such as talk radio and television with new media formats of podcasting and video game [live]streaming[2]. Streamers mediate their content across private platforms for long hours, commodifying themselves and their lives for audiences which can talk back to them, in real time. These communities span across platforms too (Taylor 2018, 13), creating participatory cultures which have a shared memory, parlance, and ideology – informed by the content they consume. A messy assemblage of person, platform, and politics is formed on Twitch (13), where hours audiences, ideas, and existing media artifacts are remixed and built upon over many hours to create something new.

0.2 Broadcasting, socially

Twitch streaming, and video game streaming more generally, as TL Taylor described in her primer to the platform in 2018, is fundamentally about the practice of "transforming private play into public entertainment" (22). These livestreaming sites though intended to be used for sharing competitive video game play – in the tradition of sports broadcasting – have evolved since 2018, providing streamers affordances which can be used for myriad genres of content generation. *Affordances* here is used in reference to what use technologies, generally speaking, offer their users (Gaver 1991). Tools originally directed at competitive gamers on livestreaming sites are now also used by causal gamers and 'let's play[ers],' referring generally to players making "narrated video…*about* playing a video game" (Kerttula 2019, emphasis mine), to further commodify their private-styled play and their viewers. Beyond this, the phenomenon of 'IRL [in real life] streams' have also taken root – everything from live podcasting to 'hot tub streams' (Twitch Staff 2021) have become common on Twitch, focusing on the experience of *people* in corporeal environments, rather than on their video game play.

While Twitch streams may seem alien at first glance, they are not dissimilar in many ways from other online video and social media sites like YouTube and Facebook

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[2] I use 'livestreaming' and 'streaming' interchangeably for brevity and for stylistic purposes. The two are used interchangeably within livestreaming communities as well, where it is normally understood to be used in reference to *live*streaming, and not video streaming *á la* Netflix, etc.

– incorporating many familiar elements alongside its new functions. To understand the initially salient characteristics of the platform, I think it is best to begin with a description of Twitch using the 'walkthrough method' – first interrogating the "environment of expected use" and then providing a "technical walkthrough" (Light, Burgess, and Duguay 2018). While this was initially envisioned as a way to engage with 'apps' as sites of study, and Twitch is commonly spoken of as a 'platform,' it exists as both and can be examined as such. Using Tarleton Gillespie's formulation of platforms as

> "online sites and services that a) host, organize, and circulate users' shared content or social interactions for then, b) without having produced the bulk of that content, c) built on an infrastructure, beneath that circulation of information, for processing data for consumer service, advertising and profit"
>
> *(Gillespie 2018, 18)*

we can more clearly visualize the ways in which Twitch operates as a *platform*: hosting, categorizing, moderating, and profiting from live video content, and its temporary archives. It operates primarily as a platform for streamers, not for viewers. For viewers, accessing the platform is done through an app or webapp,[3] which employ an amount of "technical closure" disallowing for users to customize their experience, and making scholarly inquiry into them more challenging (Light, Burgess, and Duguay 2018).[4]

Twitch is like other apps, in that as scholars we only have access to its public facing elements – however the norms of Twitch provide more insight than other similar platforms and their apps. Twitch encourages longform 'everyday' broadcasts in which the streamer directly addresses the audience: creating content for *anyone*, which is styled as being created for *someone*, each specific viewer in what media phenomenologist Paddy Scannell describes aptly as a "for-anyone-as-someone" structure (2014, 32-33). In creating this style of address, the viewer is directly involved in the productive process, as they are often privy to the many problems which occur in production. When the streamer is live and encounters a problem, they are incentivized to resolve the problem while remaining live – or risk losing their audience. As such, technical and internal problems which are more obscured in static, preprepared broadcast formats are made visible in livestreams, and are even considered an attractive quality as they humanize the end product. While streamers are themselves often the sole producers of labor, this also means that they are often the sole *producers* in the filmic sense: managing the technicalities and "layers of production" (Taylor 2018, 73-80) themselves, where a traditional TV broadcast would have staff to do so. This solo management of the stream means that there are fewer redundancies to ensure a smooth broadcast, making these public technical negotiations commonplace.

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[3] Because web applications, or 'webapps,' are accessed through a web browser like any other website, they afford users more leeway in constructing their own experience – where applications otherwise are harder for users to edit.

[4] It is worth noting that in the process of writing this, the source code for Twitch was leaked by hackers along with other data. While I will reference some of that data in later chapters, I think it is worth suggesting that the infrastructure of Twitch merits analysis directly, although I do not feel that I have the knowledge or tools myself to do so.

0.3 The environment of expected use

Twitch's initial purpose was to operate as a platform for livestreaming video game play, a spin off from the more general-use "social cam" site Justin.tv (Taylor 2018, 3). Intended for this purpose, the site developed a categorization system based on what game the streamer was playing – so, if a streamer were playing League of Legends, while they were doing so their stream would be categorized in the "League of Legends" stream category. These categories are displayed on the front page of the site, and are searchable. The categories for non-gaming streams were until recently far more general, with most non-game streamers relegated to the "Just Chatting" catch-all. The way the site is organized presents a normative idea of what using it is intended to be, even as recent years have seen Twitch adapt to a surge in popularity of "Just Chatting" beyond any individual game category (Kastrenakes 2020a).

 Twitch has multiple routes within its operating model for generating revenue, but relies primarily on a) the labor of streamers' audiences to sell advertisements; b) the labor of streamers to garner viewer subscriptions, which prevent the subscriber from seeing ads; and c) 'direct' donations, which operate like tips, known as 'bits.' The platform skims some from the top of direct bit and subscription money, and splits the ad revenue between themselves and the streamer who generated it. The way this split is divided depends on the contract that the streamer has with Twitch. Smaller, new streamers can become "Twitch Affiliates" reasonably easily after meeting several requirements: streaming for 500 minutes a 30-day period, across the course of 7 unique days, with an average of 3 concurrent viewers and a total of 50 followers. These requirements gauge the size of the channel, and once met allow for them to monetize their stream and give access to more platform-provided services. Becoming a member of the Twitch Partner Program, or TPP, is the next step. Introduced soon after the company was bought by Amazon in 2014, the TPP requires an application and that the streamer meet more stringent requirements, but allows for further monetization of their stream and access to more tools designed to increase revenue. Beyond this, top streamers are able to negotiate their own contracts with Twitch directly – Piker for example frequently speaks about how he negotiated his contract to require only one 60 second ad every hour: "…when they offered me a renegotiation for my contract I was forced to either not take a partner contract, or take a partner contract where I could at least set the terms of how many ads I can run, knowing full well that Twitch is going to run ads if I don't anyway" (Piker 2021i). While there is not currently publicly available data on how many streamers are able to negotiate their own contracts with Twitch, this is almost certainly a rare occurrence.

 Twitch maintains its profitability through a sort of hybrid governance model – relying on its terms of service, or TOS, being enforced algorithmically as well as through volunteer labor. The platform is strict in how it moderates streamers, with bans on a number of different images being shown on-screen and language-uses: real-life violence and blood; breaking the law, or encouraging breaking it; harassment against a variety of protected groups; nudity or sexual content; use of the terms "incel," "virgin," and "simp"; and many others ("Community Guidelines" 2021; Kastrenakes 2020c). It relies on community members to report these violations of TOS when they occur. Similarly, there is also a ban on many copyrighted *sounds* being played on-stream, for fear of repercussions under the Digital Millennium Copyright Act, DMCA, which are

detected algorithmically and can result in a ban if not shut off. These are also censored in video-on-demand, or VOD, archives of streams which are hosted on the site after the stream ends. Viewers participating in the live chat are policed as well. Twitch offers auto-moderation "word filtering" services to streamers which automatically filter out spam and banned words, which are customizable from channel to channel (Gillespie 2018, 98-100). These sorts of algorithmic moderation practices are fallible however, and similar to Reddit communities, each channel has different standards of what is, and is not, appropriate. Channels may then rely on volunteer moderators as well, who manually monitor the chat and discipline those who violate individual community norms and rules, as well as those enforced site-wide (Hara, Abbazio, and Perkins 2019; Massanari 2017; Gillespie 2018, 124-131). These moderators also shoulder the burden of complaints from those erroneously filtered out algorithmically in "false positives" (Gillespie 2018, 99) handling the corrective investigations of algorithmic context collapse. The audiences of Twitch channels operate as participatory cultures, with clearly defined and visible social strata developed by experience, level of participation and original contribution, and time spent as audience members (Jenkins 2009). By taking advantage of viewers' emotional investment and willingness to volunteer to keep a channel running, Twitch effectively keeps order on the site without paying for staff to moderate every livestream chat.[5]

0.4 A technical walkthrough of Twitch

There are several ways to access Twitch – navigating to https://twitch.tv/ on a computer's web browser, opening the mobile app, or opening the smart TV or game console application. According to the last public statistics, published by the company in 2015, more than 35% of viewers accessed the platform through a mobile device, second to 56% accessing it through web browsers ("2015 Retrospective" 2016). Despite only half of users accessing the service through a computer's web browser, the platform as a whole is built with desktop viewing in mind, both technically and culturally. This bias to desktop use can likely be attributed to the historical marginalization and feminization of mobile gaming within "gamer" culture (Shaw and Chess 2016; Keogh 2018). Nevertheless, experiences on Twitch differ greatly between desktop and non-desktop use.

    At the initial point of access, both desktop and other versions of the platform are fairly easy to navigate for those familiar with other social media sites which highlight videos, such as YouTube or Facebook, and the language of TV guides. The user is greeted with a plethora of streams from which to choose. The options made available are a combination of the user's subscriptions, popular content, and algorithmic recommendations based on the previous two. There is also a list of stream categories from which to choose: specific games, or nebulous IRL activities such as 'art' and 'music.' There is a search bar at the top of the page with which to look up streamers and

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[5] This is *not* always the case. For example, Twitch has regularly struggled to control crypto-racist use of emotes, relying on streamers and volunteer moderators' discretion to ban abuse in their respective communities. Twitch only officially banned such uses and other displays of racism site-wide in early 2021 (Carpenter 2020; Grayson 2019a).

categories beyond those displayed immediately. Finally, there is display of one's own subscriptions, showing which are currently live, and algorithmically recommended channels based on those one already subscribes to. The site is organized more generally into familiar groupings inherited from its televisual and radio predecessors. The site is Twitch.*tv,* and each streamer's page is a *channel*; the video feeds on those pages are called *broadcasts*; archived past broadcasts are called videos *on demand*, a clearly intentional choice as "on demand" in popular language has been squarely replaced by "streaming" with respect to online, on-demand, pre-recorded video. This language sees Twitch intentionally situating itself in the longer canon of broadcast media parlance.

All Twitch broadcasts consist of two essential elements: the video feed and the chatbox. The video feed is the assemblage of different audiovisual elements which are the main content of the event of the stream, The chatbox is the participatory element of the stream, allowing for viewers to comment on it, talk back to the streamer, and talk to each other.

The content of the video feed is customizable by streamers using a variety of third-party software tools, but usually comprises an arrangement of some of these different elements: face camera, screen capture, stream audio, notifications, and chat window. These elements, or spaces for them, are assembled into a template by the streamer using software such as Twitch Studio; Open Broadcasting Software/OBS; or Streamlabs OBS/SLOBS – which is then used to capture the video and audio input for the stream, arranging it into the template to prepare it for going live. This assembled video feed will be transmitted to Twitch using a unique identifier called a "stream key" which corresponds to a streamer's channel, so that when they go live their video feed will appear on their channel.

These elements are presented in varying ways from channel to channel depending on how the streamer organizes them. Templates can also change across the course of the stream as the streamer adapts them to their needs. Streamers may also toggle between different prepared layouts.

The 'screen capture' is the core visual element of the stream in most cases. This element is usually a feed of the streamer's computer desktop, or a program window – for game streamers this might be the game window or capture card output from a game console, for other streamers it might be a web browser window. This part of the stream shows the content that the streamer is interacting with and how they are interacting with it.

A holdover from traditional broadcast TV is the 'face cam,' this is a popular component of streams in which the streamer incorporates a video feed of their face, and sometimes body. This is typically used in video game and 'reaction' content by the streamer to show their facial reactions to what they are streaming, as opposed to being limited to audio communication. Many video game streamers will utilize a green screen to minimize the space that this takes up in the video feed, whereas streamers less concerned with the feed's real estate tend to include their rooms, endearing themselves to viewers (Taylor 2018, 100-102; Ruberg and Lark 2021).

The corollary to a stream's visual elements is the stream audio. The audio is a combination of several different streams which could be separated out, but which are more easily considered a one whole aspect of the stream. The stream audio is a

combination of the streamer's voice and that of the content displayed on-stream: from the native audio of the video game being played, to that of the YouTube video being reacted to, to in-stream notifications. Especially without a face cam, audio of the streamer's live commentary is crucial for maintaining an audience.

Notifications are a somewhat less frequent feature of streams, as they only appear intermittently. These graphics appear on the stream to promote the streamer's brand, or to indicate that the audience or an individual in it has in some way interacted with the stream. Usually these are utilized to incentivize subscriptions to the streamer, rewarding subscribers with sound effects, images, or customized messages which appear publicly and are attached to their usernames. These sorts of affective economy engagements build community and are used to fund the streamer's ability to broadcast uninterrupted (Taylor 2018, 95-97). Streamers may also use more static overlays on their streams to indicate any other sort of information: social media handles, branding, progress towards their daily subscription goal, etc.

The stream's chatbox is often visually displayed within the stream's video feed as a 'chat window,' either in the form of an overlay or as part of the screen capture. Displaying the chat as part allows for viewers to see what comments a streamer is pausing on and responding to in a busy chat, and preserves the chat's messages in off-platform recorded even when the stream ends and after the VOD is erased. The inclusion of a chat window incorporates the audience into the stream's content textually, literally turning it into the content which it consumes in a sort of participatory ouroboros.

The different arrangements of a stream's component parts in the interface of different devices' Twitch apps is where the user experience of desktop PC viewers and those accessing the service through different devices diverges. On desktop browsers, the video feed comprises around ¾ of the width of the screen, with the chatbox taking up the remaining right ¼. In the mobile Twitch app, the video feed is located in the top ⅓ of the screen, the descriptive text about the stream in the ⅓ below that, and the chatbox the ⅓ below that – at the bottom of the screen. The constraints of the mobile space mean that on an iPhone X, an average sized smartphone, only about six one-line messages can be displayed at a time. This number shrinks to four when the keyboard is opened to type. On TV Twitch applications the chat must be *opened* from a menu.

Beyond interface design issues, each physical device also offers its own set of physical limitations which make it hard to participate in a stream when not on a desktop. The element of liveness complicates participating in chat discussion when not using a computer keyboard. When in a chatroom with hundreds, or thousands, of other viewers messages move quickly off the screen, and can shape discourse in a different before a mobile viewer, or heaven forbid a TV or game console user, can finish typing their initial message. There is also a noticeable, several second delay in the video feed on many mobile phones meaning that one's contribution to the chat will be delayed with respect to on-stream events. This can be compounded by the latency which already occurs between the message sending from the viewer's client, and the streamer's client receiving it. While these things seem instantaneous to the lay-user, the physical infrastructure is made visible in the latency of active live chats. Beyond this, mobile screens are at a disadvantage in their available screen area as well. Twitch video feeds frequently incorporate textual elements which as part of a video feed cannot adjust to the size of the video viewport to remain legible, meaning that they are shrunk to a size

which is unable to be displayed legibly by the pixels on a phone's physical screen digitizer.

The most novel aspect of livestreaming, particularly on Twitch, is the chatbox itself though – unavoidably situated to the right of the video feed on a desktop, centering it with almost the same urgency.[6] The chatbox is the way through which viewers comment in real time on the events of the stream, more often directing the comments at the streamer or the content rather than at each other. Individuals in the chat operate as proxies for the larger body of viewers – where the streamer creates content for-anyone-as-someone (Scannell 2014, 32-33), the chat inverts this dynamic directing comments for-someone-as-anyone (Rudenshiold, Bach, and Hudome 2021). In this way, the chat operates less as a discussion between viewers and more as a feedback loop, through which the chat informs the content of the stream by informing the streamer's decisions, and the streamer directs the chat by providing content. T.L. Taylor describes the livestream viewer as part of a *networked audience* (2018, 38-39):

> "This component of live streams taps into language around 'engagement' that social media marketers often use superficially. It is part of a longer trajectory of interaction that spectators, fans, and audiences have always had with media objects. Contrary to the rhetoric of the passive viewer, many studies have shown over the years the creative, active ways audiences take up content. Live streaming chat continues this thread, and as users frequently do, iterates it."
>
> *(Taylor 2018, 43)*

The Twitch chat sets itself apart from those of its other streaming counterparts such as YouTube Gaming and Facebook Live by providing specialized tools to both the viewer in the chat and streamer for participating in and moderating the discussion, respectively.

Twitch emotes (Fig. 1), small images which can be sent in-line in the text of chat messages, are a vital part of the chat culture on Twitch as a platform, and of individual channels' communities. While similar in textual function to the emoji standardized by the Unicode consortium, channels are able to add their own custom emotes, made available only to subscribers. These channel-specific, custom emotes not only incentivize viewers to pay for a subscription, but also provide each channel with its own flavor. The third-party emote browser extensions BetterTwitchTV (BTTV) and FrankerFaceZ (FFZ) are widely used by viewers and streamers as well. These extensions allow for any user to access a variety of emotes which are uploaded to an external site, and then called via a text code in the chat. The browser extension then replaces the text code in-line with the associated image. These extensions allow for even unsubscribed users to access a larger variety of visual-textual affective representations. Emotes are often used repetitively in blocks of 'spam,' rather than in individual messages, which viewers use to express reactions to the content of the stream – creating a more impressionistic, swarm-like group affect (see: Rosenberg 2015) via "interactive ritual chains" (Wang and Li 2020).

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[6] I mention this to situate it in contrast to Twitch's main competitors, YouTube Gaming and Facebook Live, which physically place their chatbox below the video feed. In the case of YouTube, below and significantly smaller than the feed. These placements are indicative of the relative importance of the chat to the culture those platforms aim to cultivate.

Figure 1: Emotes referenced in this thesis. Collected from Twitch, FrankerFaceZ, and BetterTwitchTV; March 15th, 2022.

Moderation tools are also a key part of Twitch's appeal to content creators and functionality for their audiences, allowing for streamers to manage their chats effectively, and at times automatically. There are two modes of chat moderation: manual and automatic. Manual moderators are generally either community members who are promoted to a moderator status after the streamer gains enough trust in them, or are contracted out for large scale events such as e-sports competitions. These moderators use outside services such as Skype and Discord to coordinate and moderate effectively (Taylor 2018, 219-221). Twitch also offers auto-moderation services trained on Amazon Web Services' machine learning systems which enable streamers to disallow chat participants from sending messages too frequently, which are against community guidelines, or are abusing the chat in other ways (Taylor 2018, 224-227). While in other media this kind of moderation work might occur in a more backstage capacity, the norms of Twitch center the production as part of the content and involve the audience directly in it, allowing for viewers to routinely peer behind the curtain.

All of these processes – from the stream, to the chat, to the audience management – are taking place simultaneously and informing one another, forming an assemblage of broadcast: the networked audience previously mentioned. Hasan Piker's stream (Fig. 2), for example, incorporates all of these elements. While previous media formats such as television and radio incorporated audiences directly at times, the scale, directness, and immediacy of livestreaming's audience participation is unmatched[7] (Taylor 2018, 23-28).

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[7] This ability to participate directly does not mean necessarily that viewers will choose to participate in the chat though, and early research suggests that only a small number of viewers choose to do so (Flores-Saviaga et al. 2019).
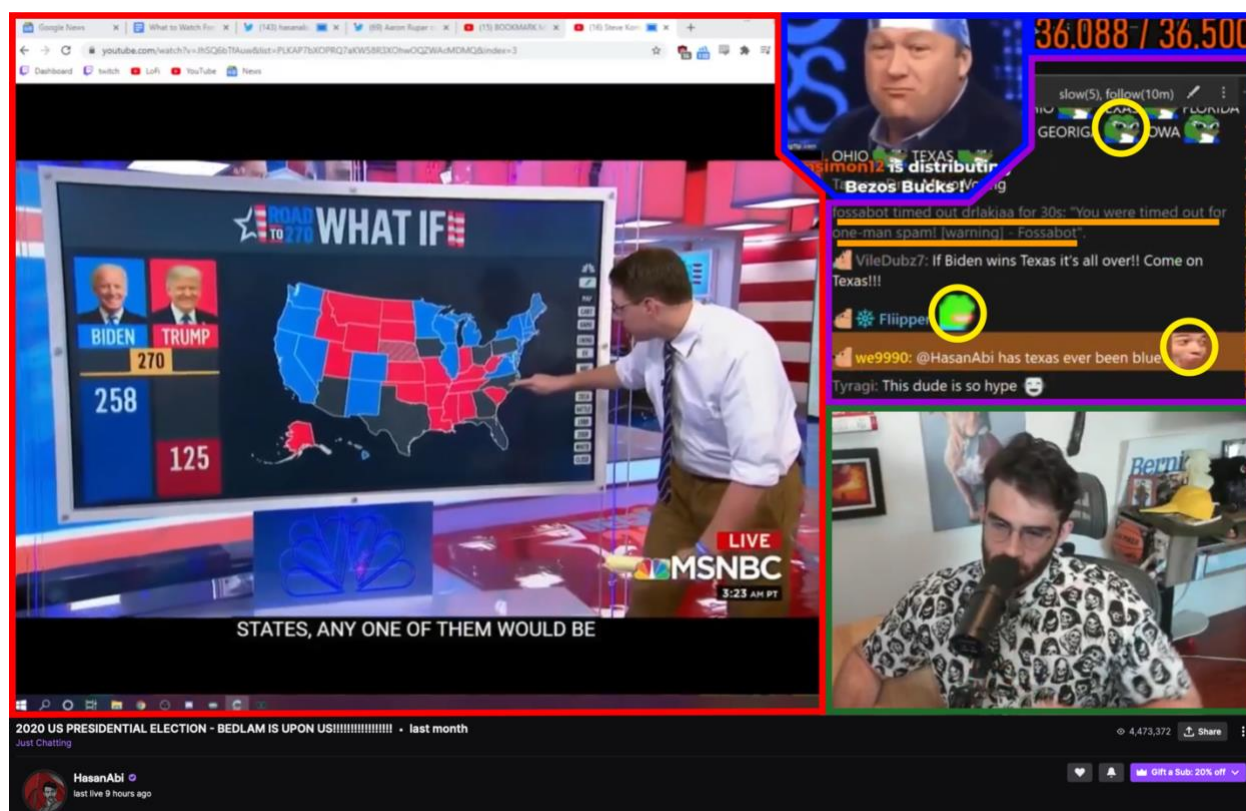
Figure 2: A screenshot of Hasan Piker's Twitch stream, annotated to indicate the different elements of the stream. Outlined in red, the screen capture of Hasan's browser with several different tabs open – streaming the YouTube MSNBC 2020 election coverage livestream. In green, Piker's face cam, showing him sitting in his living room as he streams. In purple, the on-stream Twitch chat window, enabled by the third-party software 'Chatterino.' In blue, two different overlays incentivizing participation: on the left, a custom notification thanking a new Twitch Prime subscriber; on the right, a static overlay indicating progress towards Piker's daily subscriber goal. Circled in yellow are examples of Twitch custom emotes. Underlined in orange, the moderation bot 'fossabot' temporarily suspends a chat member for spamming a message in the chat. Originally streamed by Hasan Piker on Nov. 4th, 2020. Screenshot from the hasanabi Twitch VOD. Collected Dec. 11th, 2020. https://www.twitch.tv/videos/790951798.

This is also only a cursory explanation of Twitch's technical functions – there are many features which are simply not necessary to understanding the way Twitch operates day-to-day on most channels. However, the vocabulary I introduce to talk about its specific technical and cultural elements is important to the analysis I undertake in the rest of this project.

0.5 A biographical walkthrough of Hasan Piker

As he features heavily as a colorful character, both among the contemporary Twitch elite and in this project, it feels important to also give a brief background on Hasan Piker himself.

Born in 1991 to an upper-middle class Turkish family in New Jersey, Hasan Doğan Piker was raised in Istanbul where he was interested in American culture, particularly

comic books and video games, from a young age (Lorenz 2020). He has regularly described himself as an "anchor baby," someone born in the U.S. to gain their family access American amenities (Piker 2018), and an "ameriboo," a play on the term "weeaboo" – which is used online to describe non-Japanese audiences perhaps *too* into Japanese pop culture ("Weeaboo" n.d.; Piker 2021c).

He returned to the United States for college and earned a degree in political science and communications studies from Rutgers University, before going to work for Cenk Uygur, his uncle and the founder of *The Young Turks* (TYT), a liberal progressive online media outlet (Indiana 2021). In this time at TYT, Piker initially worked on business development and ad sales, before hosting his own program formatted for Facebook starting in 2016 titled "The Breakdown," in which he offered political critique of right wing commentators (Lorenz 2020). He also wrote political content for online media outlet *The Huffington Post* from 2016 to 2018 ("Hasan Piker" n.d.). In August 2019, he started a new, explicitly anti-capitalist series at TYT titled "Agitprop," in which he conducted hour long interviews of other leftists in a video-podcast format ("Agitprop with Hasan Piker" n.d.). His success at TYT earned him the moniker "Woke Bae," and propelled him into the general consciousness of online political and media circles (Smothers 2018; Holt 2017).

On March 23rd 2018, Piker also started what would become his most notable media venture yet – the "hasanabi" Twitch channel. Starting out playing popular video games like *Fortnite* and *God of War* to few viewers alongside his work at *The Young Turks*, these streams quickly became politically involved – within a month Piker began titling his broadcasts things like "conservatives hate free speech lol" and began collaborating with similar-minded online leftists like Felix Biederman of the popular podcast *Chapo Trap House* ("HasanAbi - Stream Apr 22, 2018" 2018; "HasanAbi - Stream Apr 19, 2018" 2018). By 2019, Piker had transitioned from primarily gaming content to political coverage and commentary, playing off of the upcoming election cycle's primary season, while still continuing to work at TYT.

On August 21st of 2019 though, Piker received a seven-day suspension from Twitch for comments he made about Texas representative Dan Crenshaw's justification of the U.S.' continued violent military presence in the Middle East on *The Joe Rogan Experience* podcast:

> "This is so insane. America deserved 9/11 dude, fuck it, I'm sayin' it. We fucking totally brought it on ourselves, dude, we fucking did. Holy shit. Look at the way that this dipshit is running his fucking mouth, justifying genocide right now."
> *(Grayson 2019b)*

This comment was widely circulated by right wing pundits – Tucker Carlson on Fox News, Alex Jones on *Infowars*, Ben Shapiro of *The Daily Wire*, and others. Following this controversy, TYT cancelled "Agitprop" causing Piker to quit in early 2020 to take up Twitch streaming full-time (bluelaughter 2020).

As he continued to cover the 2020 election, Piker became notable for two high-profile streams specifically, growing his audience significantly in the process. He and military intelligence whistleblower Chelsea Manning organized a get-out-the-vote event on-stream in which U.S. representatives Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Ilhan Omar and

Twitch, and Twitch celebrities including Imane "Pokimane" Anys played the popular video game *Among Us*. This stream broke Twitch records for the most-watched first stream for a channel, garnering over 435,000 concurrent viewers at its peak on Ocasio-Cortez' channel alone (Benjamin 2020; Stephen 2020a; Tran et al. 2021).

His election night coverage, however, has been his own channel's most popular broadcast. The week of the election he spent over 80 hours covering the lead up and returns live to, at the stream's peak, 225,000 concurrent viewers – with his Nov. 4th stream alone hitting over 4.5 million unique views (Lorenz 2020). During the day-of broadcast he had guests lined up, from political commentators like the hosts of *Chapo Trap House*, to journalists like Osita Nwanevu from *The New Republic* and Ryan Grim from *The Intercept*, to fellow Twitch celebrities like Will Neff and Austin "AustinShow," each contributing their own insight and opinions on the events as the occurred, and lending the broadcast itself their implicit validation.

In the period since, Piker has risen in prominence to become one of Twitch's top streamers, and is the only explicitly political voice among them. According to recent leaks, confirmed by streamers themselves, Piker's channel ranks 13th highest on the site – grossing him over $2.7 million between August 2019 and October 2021 from subscription income alone (Miceli 2021). He has also been covered by *The New York Times* (Lorenz 2020), *NY Mag*'s "Intelligencer" (Winkie 2021), and other mainstream outlets, who have called him various things amounting to "the future of election night coverage" (Jackson 2020).

0.6 Looking Ahead

Political content on Twitch, and political livestreaming generally, has received relatively little attention compared to its counterparts on other platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. And, while that attention is certainly warranted, this new form of political broadcast has the potential to visibly shape, and be shaped by, its audience's views in a direct and previously unprecedented way. Leftist commentary in "gamer" spaces has received little scholarly attention relative to its right wing counterparts on other platforms. The direct impact of harassment directed at journalists and academics by the explicitly far right, racist, anti-feminist, anti-LGBTQ #GamerGate movement, and the link between those same online elements by the 2016 Trump presidential campaign have, not without cause, dominated the discussion of gamers and politics (Shaw and Chess 2016; Massanari 2017; Mortensen 2018; Beran 2019; Nagle 2017; Condis 2019b; Shaw 2014; Salter and Blodgett 2012). Certainly these events have characterized many of the most visible elements of online culture for some time – and are actively taken advantage of by right-wing strategists (Snider 2017; Kamenetz 2018; Townsend 2021; Condis 2019a; 2019b; A. Jones 2020). With this project, I am by no means interested in creating a counter-narrative to the thoroughly documented history of these events. Rather, I hope to demonstrate how one of these spaces' technological affordances and culture operate in tandem to create political media which at feels once new and familiar: remixing right-wing and liberal communication strategies for leftist politics, as well as creating their own. "Gamers," however that group may be defined, are not essentially reactionary, and the tools developed by and for them are not either, as will be discussed in the first chapter. Hasan Piker for the first year of his Twitch

career streamed with a chyron on his video feed listing his self-appointed job title: "provocateur gamer." If an avowed socialist "gamer" can make himself the most popular explicitly political voice on a gaming platform – certainly there is hope for, and maybe change among, "gamers" as a whole.

Specifically speaking, this project will in its first chapter historically situate Twitch as a platform in the technical and rhetorical lineages of political media and live broadcasting, and Piker in the cultural moment at which he rose to prominence. Twitch combines characteristics from video game streaming, social media influencer culture; previous iterations of online political media; traditional genres of TV and radio broadcasting, like talk radio and newscasting; and others. Without exposing those connections, it can be difficult to see how a Twitter feud between Nicki Minaj and a politics livestreamer is indicative of some important new media phenomenon. In the second chapter, I will focus in on the elements of Twitch as an individual platform – focusing specifically on its economy: the ways in which it the configuration of labor and viewership on Twitch mutually shape its political content. Then, in the third chapter I bring these two prior considerations together in an autoethnographic walkthrough, showing how the stream itself works to create a new, distinct kind of political community. Finally, in the conclusion I consider the leftist broadcasting future imaginary that political livestreaming represents.

Throughout the text I revisit Hasan Piker's Twitch channel as a main case study, although I will reference other similar channels. As the leading political voice on Twitch, Piker sets the tone and precedent for much of the direct and indirect political discussion on Twitch. In these qualities Piker is currently unique, far ahead of any other similar-purpose Twitch stream. His success, though, spells possibility for the future of political talk on the platform as a whole, as I discuss in the conclusion of this paper. His stream is also the most archived and available for study because of his popularity.[8] While much of my analysis will take the shape of tried-and-true qualitative methods like discourse analysis, I combine these with the newer computational content analysis when appropriate. Twitch is a quickly evolving, fast-paced platform, and the culture it houses is equally so – as such, it demands this kind of mixed-methods approach.

Finally, a brief comment on the tone of this project as a whole. The autoethnographic impetus which inspired this project, derived from my own attention to political livestreams and online political happenings more generally, as well as my own situation as a white, cis, 'Zillennial,' gay man in the United States will certainly at times color the ways I analyze and retell the events and practices described in the chapters to follow. Between that inescapable, personal relationship, and the often absurd and ambiguously humorous elements of the content to which I turn my attention, there will be moments at which, what internet researchers Whitney Phillips and Ryan Milner call, the "academic fourth wall" (2017, 19) will need to be broken:

> "sometimes to affirm a theoretical concept, perhaps by presenting a personal experience or first-person exemplar. Sometimes to complicate a theoretical concept, perhaps by illustrating how, actually, that's not how we've seen things

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[8] The lack of available, archived, and complete Twitch broadcasts is a barrier to future research of livestreaming – especially in that chat transcripts are not preserved as text data, or at all, in most cases.

done. Sometimes to indicate that [I, as a scholar,] feel ambivalently about texts and traditions that [I, as a person,] have personally engaged with and enjoyed."
(Phillips and Milner 2017, 19)

This ability to shift tone in this way enables a flexibility to acknowledge at once the frivolity with which real, serious discussions manifest, intentionally or not, as entertainment in digital spaces – an absolute necessity when such media events may simultaneously include dramas like those, for example, concerning the ballooning of a rapper's cousin's friend's testicles, "white genocide" white supremacist conspiracy theories, and the very serious public health issue of vaccine skepticism during a global pandemic.

   With all that said, if video game livestreaming is "transforming private play into public entertainment" (Taylor 2018, 22), let me begin in earnest this foray into political livestreaming – the transforming of private *politics* into public entertainment and discourse.

Chapter 1: Past broadcasts, live today

1.1 From talk radio to Twitch.tv

Obviously, Twitch is far from the first medium for partisan political discourse. Both the political culture developing on Twitch, as well as its affordances as a platform make it interesting as a site of study. It is the result of iteration: a snowball of past paradigms' format, rhetoric, and political lessons – made new and fresh in their convergence. Each facet of the stream can be connected back to a predecessor, from which it inherits some technical or rhetorical quality. This *heredity* (Keogh 2018, 79-80) of technical and cultural norms from predecessors which surround the site allows for access to it. While in many contexts acting as a force for exclusion, heredity here can be seen as more inclusive, as users with knowledge of *any* one of these parent media formats has a point of entry.

   Beginning in the late 1980's, with the repeal of the fairness doctrine and the advent of widely broadcast partisan talk radio; then to the political commentary TV which rose in its wake; and to the internet-hosted political discussions which dominate today – there is a clear through line of development leading to Twitch's leftist political insurgency. To understand the connection, and the specific elements of each media form that Twitch political commentators borrow, it is important to first understand them in their native environments. Mostly chronological, this chapter is a walkthrough of partisan political broadcasting from the past 40-or-so years: their technologies, audiences, and personalities. In the words of Annette Markham and Nancy Baym:

> "Those who turn to the internet as a new topic of study may find it easy to forget that we are not the first people to live through times of technological, cultural, or disciplinary change. Even those on the cutting edge need to know what remains continuous across these changes and what history has to teach us."
> *(Baym and Markham 2009, xiv).*

1.2 Talking on-air

The story of political media could start anywhere – as far back as 18th century pamphleteering, or even Martin Luther's protestant theses – but in the late-stage capitalist American context, the story begins with Rush Limbaugh. In the United States' culture wars, beginning in the late 1960's, reactionaries were feeling the pressure of a world which they felt had betrayed their values and was leaving them behind (Rosenwald 2019, 11-13). So, when the "fairness doctrine," which restricted the broadcast of only one viewpoint when talking about controversial issues, was repealed by the US Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in 1987, the media sphere was already primed for some Thermidorian force against what conservatives considered the "liberal, politically correct establishment" (15). That it would be Limbaugh's AM burned-over, far-right radio broadcasts specifically, though, was more chance initially than anything: the fortunate meeting of a maligned right wing America and struggling AM broadcasters who often did not share their views, but wanted their money (18-19).

Limbaugh's success, once syndicated, had to do with his unique blend of interactive talk radio, conservative advocacy, and the "sensibilities of rock-music radio" (Rosenwald 2019, 24). This manifested in "edgy" content "flavored conservative" (25) which, while not the first ever, Limbaugh was the first to take national (25). Prior to his emergence onto the talk scene, most hosts doing similarly formatted shows shared liberal politics, if they discussed them explicitly at all, and were highly local (25). He differed, too, from conservative precursors in his goal of attracting advertisers by keeping his audience engaged through entertainment, not just dry doomsaying:

> "While [conservative predecessors] sternly educated about the dangers of Communism, Limbaugh humanized the threat. For instance, he coined the term "Gorbasm" to describe liberals' 'expression of sheer delight' whenever Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev 'was on the scene.' News of a Gorbasm was accompanied by its own theme song—the 'Imperial March' from *Star Wars*, also known as Darth Vader's theme."
>
> *(Rosenwald 2019, 25-26)*

Limbaugh, in this way, was "the first person to apply the DJ's performance art to politics," applying sound cuts and elements live-editing to radio political commentary (26).

Talk radio differed from other media forms at the time in that, especially after the advent of cellular phones, it encouraged direct listener engagement and fostered community in its listenership (Rosenwald 2019, 17). Conservative listeners at the time were hungry for exactly that, feeling isolated in a media environment which they felt blamed them, and their views, for the United States' failings. Conservative talk radio gave these people a safe space through which to vent their frustrations anonymously, and to find solidarity among other like-minded people (33). This listening community was often called to action as well, to fundraise for conservative businesses in "cash mobs" (18), vote on their "true beliefs" (53), or pressure politicians in person (105). This power to mobilize its huge, dedicated listenership catapulted conservative talk radio into the position of guiding Republican policy and platform, legitimized by the *National Review* and Ronald Reagan's praise of Limbaugh and his work (62).

While some liberal talk radio followed conservatives' ascendancy on the format in the 90's, the style of liberal commentary was not conducive to the talk format. Where conservatives placed a priority on remaining entertaining, liberals put their political agenda front-and-center, instead of using it as a filter for their charisma (Rosenwald 2019, 118). This is not an intrinsic quality, and leftists have found some success in talk in the years since its peak, combining the sharp critique of liberals by conservative talk with sharp critique of conservatives as well – adopting a more comedy-oriented tone than their liberal predecessors. WCRS' "anarcho-comedy" *Street Fight Radio*, for example, is cited as an inciting influence by many of the most popular left-wing podcasts of the late 2010's and early 20's (Biderman, Christman, and Menaker 2021).

1.3 Talking heads

Limbaugh's influence on media did not stop at the end of the radio dial. In 1996, seeing the commercial success of staunchly partisan conservative talk radio, Rupert Murdoch's Fox News launched across the United States (Rosenwald 2019, 101). Aside from explicit advisement that Fox should take the form of "news talk-radio with video," its content made clear that the concept of tackling all topics from a holistically right wing worldview was inherited from talk radio, prioritizing opinion and analysis over reportage (102).

Fox, in translating Limbaugh's talk radio formula to TV, introduced to it the visual elements endemic to the 24-hour news media. From texts like chyrons, to argument-legitimating visuals, to the sort of face-on direct address – television expanded the explicitly partisan media sphere's range and influence: "Fox has successfully shown how TV news need not be *about* politics but can *be* politics instead" (J. P. Jones 2012, 184). The kind of opinion in the shape of news produced by Fox, with the trappings of text and on a "News" channel, likely influences viewers' opinions significantly, as Americans today still have trouble distinguishing between news and opinion coverage (Loker 2018; J. P. Jones 2012). Fox News' viewership also brought the ravenous drive for entertainment-based political media to TV full-time, with its early adopters more likely to seek out entertaining political news and to misrepresent or misunderstand the news they consume (Morris 2005). This more engaging delivery of partisan news also has had a measurable impact on voter conviction and turnout for conservatives, translating mobilization to electoral results[9] (DellaVigna and Kaplan 2007).

The success of Fox is enabled by its creation of an imagined community centered around viewership, which for them is tied inextricably to their far-right brand of ideology (J. P. Jones 2012, 180) – rather than the more effete liberalism of their direct competitors. Important to this ideological community building is the direct address through which their hosts deliver information. The 'for-anyone-as-someone' rhetorical structure employed by such Fox wunderkind as Tucker Carlson imitates a serious conversational tone, which can be identified by all viewers within a certain ideological distance of his own views. This structure has the effect of making even Fox's mass-distributed, impersonal content feel intensely personal to each member of the community or in-group (Scannell 2014, 32-33). In a similar effect to how the audience's want for political talk radio directed Limbaugh to become more politically oriented, the rhetorical closeness of Fox to its audience has been observed to represent what its audience desires rather than to direct its audience itself (J. P. Jones 2012, 181).

Obviously, the visual format also allows for the incorporation of new on-screen elements contemporaneous with a presenter delivering an opinion. Chyrons and other on-screen images give viewers direct textual information without the seeming temporal spontaneity of liveness. While the two often echo one another, this sort of direct message from the network producers are key in succinctly describing and creating a narrative (Howe and Santora 2020, 135).

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[9] While MS/NBC is regularly compared to Fox as partisan news for liberals, its ability to mobilize and polarize its audience is much less clear. It itself is much less partisan-branded than its conservative counterpart (Tryon 2016, 48).

Fox also brings one more huge boon to partisan media that talk radio does not: its availability. The format of TV and radio both are only useful when there is something being broadcast at all times, and while radio stations do always have *something* on-air, that is not always something *talk* or political – and those that were, however popular, were still localized (Scannell 2014, 37; Rosenwald 2019, 48). Fox News has the benefit of being nationally always available, showing the same ideologically driven content across the country on cable channels, as well as more intermittently through local affiliate stations.

1.4 Liberal infotainment

Both Limbaugh's radio and Fox News have been characterized post-hoc as "infotainment" – news presented as entertainment (Rosenwald 2019, 103). Before the term itself came to widespread use, especially in the wake of the Clinton administration's scandals (Delli Carpini and Wiliams 2001, 168), Neil Postman predicted its ascendance in his 1986 book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Postman observed that:

> "Americans no longer talk to each other, they entertain each other. They do not exchange ideas, they exchange images. They do not argue with propositions; they argue with good looks, celebrities and commercials."
>
> *(Postman 2006, 92)*

While Postman's tone may feel a little bit "old man yells at cloud" to audiences today (see: "Old Man Yells at Cloud" n.d.), there is truth in his assertion as evidenced by the almost immediate, subsequent rise of talk radio and TV after the following year's fairness doctrine repeal, not just as entertainment, but as news sources and forums for much of the American public.

While it certainly applies to those prior formats too, infotainment conceptually comes into its own in the liberals' response to Fox-style TV: political late-night comedy and satire TV. Beginning in the late 1990's Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show* was the beginning of the liberal retort to conservatives' vice-grip on the partisan media market – satirizing the "truthiness" of pundits like Bill O'Reilly and Sean Hannity (Tryon 2016, 71-72). Just as Conservatives went to Fox for nominally "fair and balanced" news (42), despite its heavily editorialized and opinion-laden comment, liberals flocked to and trusted Stewart for their political information (72). His, and later Stephen Colbert's, viewers received more accurate information than cable news watchers and Limbaugh listeners as well, earning them further trust among their community of viewership (73).

These so-called "fake news shows," not to be confused with the newer Trumpian concept of "fake news," like *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* aped the style and set dressing of cable news, but filled them with criticisms of news and political figures. These programs introduced heavy doses of intertextuality and cynicism into their audiences' media diets, meeting frustrated, more-informed liberals where they were (71-75). The cynicism of these shows in particular negatively affected the opinions of politicians of its viewers (Baumgartner and Morris 2006), and has been blamed for the rise in distrust of political institutions (Hart and Hartelius 2007).

Nevertheless these shows, in their pan-ideological critique, especially during the early days of the Iraq War "pointed out[…]the rhetorical postures and unstated assumptions that upheld the Washington consensus" (Tryon 2016, 103). In the years since Stewart's retirement and Colbert's transition to the non-satire *Late Show*, American TV political satire has largely found itself in a tough position. Following the media-savvy Obama campaign's coopting of Bush-era stalwarts *The Daily Show* and *Colbert*, these programs seemed to take a more liberal stance – when under the previous administration they had levied their influence across both parties, if more at conservatives (Marks 2017; Higgie 2017).

In the Trump and post-Trump eras of American politics, too, there has been a quantitative and qualitative shift in TV political comedy (Farnsworth and Lichter 2019, 132). While there is a wide difference of opinion in what that change has been, whether it be a surplus of jokes because of how target-rich the environment has become, or a failing of jokes due to Trump and other politicians' ability to direct and control even comedic narratives – the landscape of liberal TV humor has changed (132-135). There has been a boom and glut of what the *New York Times* described in 2020 as "liberal clip shows," which even nominally showing the full partisanship and diminished stature of this genre, however influential it was and has the potential to be (Brooks). In an interview with producers for *The Daily Show*, columnist Dan Brooks asked what types of jokes they had "learned not to do" – to which they replied "sarcasm."

> "People are so emotionally invested you almost have to not couch things in sarcasm, because people will momentarily wonder if you're not on their side. We have to signal to the audience, 'Hey, we know how you're feeling,' so it doesn't seem like you're making light of a serious thing."
>
> *(Brooks 2020)*

This inability to distinguish satire about media events from descriptions of reality points to a proliferation of what John Fiske described using Baudrillard's concept of "hyperreality." Fiske in his 1996 book *Media Matters* described how the delimiters of mediated representations of reality and reality itself were becoming increasingly unstable (2). When "fake news" satire becomes the most trusted source of news for liberals, and the jokes made about the former presidents, Clinton and Bush, reincarnate *as the president*, in Trump – it is not a surprise that satire TV had a harder time landing in the late 2010's and, now, in the early 2020's.

1.5 Talking online

Concurrent, and contributing, to the rise of liberal satire TV was the proliferation of the internet and, subsequently, social media (Gray, Thompson, and Jones 2009, 3; Tryon 2016, 6). As access to social media expanded, the political media landscape changed dramatically with the barrier to entry lowered for any enterprising individual to start their own media outlet – be it a blog, forum, or otherwise – and provided ample space for anyone else to directly make their response to said outlets heard.

David Tewksbury and Jason Rittenberg describe the internet's effect on political news consumption as having two dimensions. The first is that it is much easier to

access existing and otherwise centralized news outlets, with most users accessing a few large ones with a 'long tail' of smaller outlets that still receive some attention (Tewksbury and Rittenberg 2015, 10-11; Anderson 2004). The second dimension being the novel development and proliferation of user generated content in one form or another: citizen journalism blogs, comments section diatribes, or simply likes and shares (Tewksbury and Rittenberg 2015, 11).

This kind of news consumption is facilitated by web platforms, discussed further in chapter 2, which can be broadly categorized into two groups: social networking sites (SNSs), like Facebook, Twitter, or MySpace which center interpersonal relationships; and user-generated content (UGC) hosting sites, like YouTube or Twitch which center user generated content over interpersonal relationships. While these two categories overlap in different facets, and incorporate the each other's central elements to different degrees, this rudimentary distinction is enough for my purposes. Through these platforms, people are able to control their news consumption to a degree previously impossible – further limiting the ideological scope of political media they might be exposed to (Tewksbury and Rittenberg 2015, 13-14). SNSs act in this capacity as facilitators for "networked publics," as danah boyd describes, technologized publics simultaneously composed of "the space constructed through networked technologies and[…]the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice" (2011, 39). The restructuring of traditional publics through SNSs complicates conversations about audience by introducing invisible audiences, which may be temporally disconnected from the original interaction; collapsed context, in which that disconnect breaks down the boundaries of distinct social context; and a blurring of public and private, which is aided by the two previous dynamics (49). The impacts of this transformation on political discourse are messy, and as challenging to navigate as observers as they are to participants, and thus are important to be aware of in analyzing such spaces.

The types of media that people consume online varies widely too – from those previously discussed legacy outlets, to the para-texts attached to them, to original content generated or remixed by casual users. Much of this original and remixed content comes in the form of ambiguous humor and internet memes (Phillips and Milner 2017). While the definition of what an "internet meme" exactly is varies widely from scholar to scholar, and indeed from use to use casually, Limor Shifman's 2013 three-pronged definition continues to hold weight today:

"(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance;
(b) that were created with awareness of each other; and
(c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users."
(Shifman 2013, 7-8)

While memes may take many forms and be employed for any number of different purposes, they regularly intersect with political discourses. Memes may be politically charged in their initial conception, such as with the meme generated from 2012 Republican presidential hopeful Mitt Romney's "binders full of women" incident (Shifman 2013, 4; Milner 2018, 64); or, they may be appropriated for political purposes, such as

with the infamous Pepe the Frog, be it by the American far right, or by Hong Kong pro-democracy activists (Nagle 2017; Victor 2019; A. Jones 2020; Phillips and Milner 2021). Pepe, as a prominent example, shows how consequential memes have become in both online and offline politics, and how even as political artifacts they remain highly polysemic and may simultaneously contain many "contested and conflicting meanings" (Glitsos and Hall 2019).

Opposite the artifactual side of "internet culture" is the human. The internet has grown its own particular breed of online celebrities and micro-celebrities commonly known as "social media influencers" (Freberg et al. 2011). Micro-celebrity is a phenomenon which has come from the introduction of the "attention economy into the everyday lives and relationships" of social media users in which a person is famous to a "niche group of users" and presents themselves as such "regardless of who is paying attention" (Marwick 2013, 16, 98). Micro-celebrities create communities of influence, based on different interests or markets, in which they compete against one another for influence while socializing together (Marwick 2013, 97-137). This genre of internet personality often cultivates what are called "para-social" relationships. Originating in studies of mid-century mass media audiences, the para-sociality is generally the practices surrounding a belief of an audience that they are in the "circle of [the performer's] peers" (Horton and Richard Wohl 1956). These para-social relationships form across different media formats, not in the least political talk radio and news TV (Hofstetter and Gianos 1997; Levy 1979), but within an online political context it feels most important to discuss podcasts and YouTube videos.

A podcast, briefly, generally refers to an audio file distributed via the internet – often serialized and sometimes with a video corollary (Bottomley 2015). While over the years there have been successful podcasts in many genres, political talk remains a perennially popular one. With the low barrier to entry that podcasts require, compared to their broadcast counterparts, it represented a spiritual successor to independent broadcasting stations in an increasingly corporatized era (Sterne et al. 2008). Within podcasting today, many of the most profitable independent political enterprises are staunchly left wing regularly claiming top rankings on independent creator platform Patreon ("Top Patreon Creators" n.d.). These "left-stars" cultivate para-social relationships through their irreverent and intimate style of address, operating in the same realm as talk radio hosts, as "virtual friends" for their listeners (Sperber 2021). Podcasts like these and others operate as ideological enclaves for marginal and marginalized groups, "cocooning" listeners in left ideological discussion when broader cultural discussion tends liberal or reactionary, in a similar fashion to marginalized groups use podcasts as ways to escape oppressive social hegemony (Florini 2015). These intimate uses for podcasts commonly cause para-social relationships between hosts and listeners to develop (Schlütz and Hedder 2021; Zuraikat 2020).

Online video content has also been a noted place for para-social development, on the most popular video hosting platform, YouTube, especially (Chen 2016). YouTube, as a platform, allows for users to upload, monetize, and react to videos – as well as, crucially, to "subscribe" to specific video creators' "channels" (Burgess and Green 2018, 4-7). Opposite podcasts, which have a notable left-wing community, YouTube has garnered a reputation for hosting notorious far right communities and their content, the specifics of which will be detailed later in this chapter. Nevertheless, its affordance of

easy para-sociality has built communities around right wing ideals – creating, aptly, a supply-and-demand cycle of creation incentivizing their continuation (Munger and Phillips 2022). Often these kinds of videos, like those of other genres, on YouTube are in the form of "reaction videos," in which the host responds to another piece of media, or more general "rant" content in which the uploader talks about a topic at length to the audience (Werner 2012). These right wing creators on YouTube, especially in the early to mid 2010's, appealed to young white men who identified as "gamers," often participants in gaming forums and imageboards, intent on radicalizing them to the far right through cultural commentary (Roose 2019).

1.6 Video games

At the same time as the internet and its social faculties became easier to access, so too did video games, both via home consoles and more powerful personal computers in the 1980's and 1990's. With them though, came a set of dominant masculinized values associated with the identity of "gamer" (Keogh 2018, 173). Brendan Keogh describes the archetypical "gamer" figure as a "hacker technicity," centering normative, masculist techno-fetishist narratives of domination and control at its core (2018, 170-172). While this does not represent all video game players – data shows that the demographics of video game players is increasingly diverse (Entertainment Software Association 2021) – it does represent the monolithic narrative surrounding video games until relatively recently.

The cultural narrative of who plays games, how they play them, and what happens in discussions around games was the result of what has been described as "toxic gamer culture" (Consalvo 2012). This iteration of "gamer culture"[10] emphasized misogynistic, racist, homophobic, transphobic, and otherwise reactionary politics (Condis 2015; Paaßen, Morgenroth, and Stratemeyer 2017; Shaw 2012; K. Gray 2012) – more on this and the event surrounding it below. The result of this cultural disposition was an increasing invisibility or ignorance of gaming happening outside of those cultural bounds, and a gatekeeping of who was, and was not, a *real* gamer (Shaw 2012; Paaßen, Morgenroth, and Stratemeyer 2017).

This toxic culture particularly exhibited itself in online gameplay. When joining lobbies or talking to strangers online, a fundamental internet play experience, gamers often exhibited and normalized reactionary and prejudicial ideologies (K. Gray 2014, xxi). These online gameplay spaces served as places of sociality, in which gamers would play together, but also talk together – in perpetuating prejudicial ideologies across them, players who held social power effectively gatekept those who did not meet their standard of "gamer."

A lasting effect of this "gamer" paradigm can be perhaps predictably seen in its most competitive element: e-sports. Electronic sports, or competitive video game play is notably absent of many prominent women in part due to the continued idea that women

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[10] I maintain quotation marks around "gamer culture" because too often this is applied to all cultures of gaming, and indeed all people who identify as gamers. I would direct those interested in gaming which pushes back against these "hacker technicity" norms to read Adrienne Shaw's *Gaming at the Edge* (2015), Keogh (2018) on the "cyborg technicity" and Bo Ruberg's *Queer Games Avant Garde* (2020).

are essentially not interested in it (Taylor 2018, 193). This can be seen as well in platforms initially developed for e-sports broadcasting too, even as they turn away from the competitive broadcast "meta." Of the top 50 earners on Twitch in 2021, only one was a women (Miceli 2021).

The seeming opposite of competitive gaming, "let's play" videos are another important media output of video game cultures. This more "passive" gaming content garnered a large audience on YouTube and pushed "casual" gaming to the forefront on Twitch (Gekker 2018; Glas 2015; Sjöblom et al. 2017). Let's play videos and streams aim to give the viewer vicarious gratification through the play, and commentary, of a game from its beginning[11] (Glas 2015; Sjöblom et al. 2017). This sort of commentary on top of play is reminiscent of the reaction video YouTube genre, in which the transformation of the content comes in the form of the commentator giving their own opinion on the other media on-screen.

1.7 Gaming politics

Video games themselves have always been political media, however in the mid 2010's "toxic gamer culture" seemed to recognize itself as a political entity. What began as interpersonal relationship issues quickly became possibly the most notorious, public event in the cultural understanding of "gaming": #GamerGate (#GG).

#GG is a saga which has been chronicled extensively both in popular (Wingfield 2014; Dewey 2014; Warzel 2019; Donovan 2019; Jeong 2019; Wu 2019) and academic (Massanari 2017; Mortensen 2018; Shaw and Chess 2016) writing. In short, it was an extended harassment campaign conducted beginning in 2014 by specific self-identified "gamer" communities against women, particularly women of color, who were involved in video game journalism, development, and academic study (Phillips and Milner 2021, 102-103). The perpetrators of #GG harassment skewed heavily towards young, white men who frequented the /pol/ board on the popular discussion site 4chan, and later 8chan, as well as gaming-specific subforums on the social media site Reddit (102-103). Among the many tactics these "trolls" subjected their targets to included dissemination of revenge porn, doxing, rape and death threats (Nagle 2017, 21-22). While these types of trolling are indeed severe, they are emblematic of what Phillips and Milner describe as "subcultural trolling," which they characterize as more influential than traditional strains in its ability to fly under the radar as *trolling*, and to reach a larger audience when it *does* break out of the subculture as is not identified as such by reporters and mainstream press (2021, 101, 105). This type of subcultural trolling, at the time, was easily dismissed as "a basic part of learning how to internet" (105).

The dismissal of internet spaces as such, made sites like 4chan, 8chan, and Reddit fruitful grounds for far right ideological recruitment. These sites, which had already flirted with ideologies like Nazism and white nationalism "ironically" as "edgy humor," were cultivated actively by the corresponding far right media apparatus (104). Outlets like *The Daily Stormer*, run by noted white nationalist Richard Spencer, funneled

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[11] I specifically do not say to its *end* here, in that arguably the most popular games for let's play content do not have a concrete narrative or end, allowing for the content creator to create their own lore and story ad infinitum.

disaffected, irony-poisoned, privileged young white men into right wing ideological circles or, rather, Venn diagrams (104).

Groups like the "manosphere," a rough alliance of specifically misogynistic malcontent men (Alice E. Marwick and Caplan 2018; Van Valkenburgh 2021), and the "intellectual dark web," far-right self-proclaimed on psychology and politics (Parks 2020; Finlayson 2021), among other fields, found footing in online video game spaces. These figures legitimated themselves among more credulous communities like "incels" and conspiracy theorists, who frequented internet forums, through debate-derived argumentative strategies. These arguments laid the ideological groundwork for their new followers to seek out more extreme right wing radical content: white nationalism, neo-Nazism, fascism, etc. Multiple cases of violence have been attributed, at least in-part, to these internet groups' influence: from the 2014 Isla Vista mass shooting (Winton and Branson-Potts 2018), to the 2018 Toronto van attacks (Cecco 2021), to the 2019 Christchurch mosque shooting (Lerman 2019).

The ludic character of these spaces (Boluk and LeMieux 2017, 278-279; Phillips and Milner 2017), carried over in part from their 'gaming' precursors, and the interactions which happen on them once again led to the dismissal of their influence by many spectators in the lead up to the 2016 U.S. presidential election. And, while in retrospect the influence of gamers directly on the outcome has been largely overstated, the effort to "meme" Donald Trump into the presidency was largely hailed as a success within them (Schreckinger 2017; Ohlheiser 2016). Indeed, Trump campaign advisor and noted white nationalist Steve Bannon explicitly stated his intent to recruit from these disaffected and radicalized groups for the campaign's internet "army" (Snider 2017). It has been widely observed that the tactics trialed in #GamerGate have gone on to inform the broader conservative movement's online organization and offensive strategy (Warzel 2019; Jeong 2019). This through-line continues to the more recent conspiracist rightist Qanon and similar elements, which are speculated to have started as [subcultural] trolling on the same 4chan imageboard as did #GG (Broderick 2018; Mearhoff 2018; Woolf 2018).

The play-making of online politics, and political violence, by #GG and subsequent movements makes them particularly hard to engage with too (Phillips and Milner 2021; Boluk and LeMieux 2017, 275-284). The goal of trolling, for example, is to provoke an angry or outraged response from its target. Treating such rhetorics with the seriousness they deserve then often has the effect of legitimizing them and emboldening their purveyors – you help meet their goal, to "trigger the libs." The internalized un-seriousness with which these groups operate, too, gives them cover: "it's just a joke" or "I'm just memeing" operate to self-obfuscate one's complicity in the dangerous ideology that right wing online trolling perpetuates. On the other hand, ignoring these actors allows for the issue to metastasize. Adherents to the conspiracist thinking that right wing movements perpetuate online are also disincentivized from renouncing their belief. Often either self-isolated from their families and/or surrounded by a social circle which reinforces their belief, the ludic character of "uncovering the 'truth'" is more fun for followers than accepting more accurate, see: *boring*, explanations of wrongdoing or inequity. Disengaging from the self-inflicted alternate-reality game (ARG) mindset of online conspiracy is simply less entertaining, than the alternative (View et al. 2022).

Pushing back against this narrative of the right-wing's totalitarian grip on gaming as a practice, culture, and politic is part of the goal of this thesis. While #GG began in 2014, its influence still often feels like a barrier to having conversations about other movements within this space. It is important to remember that #GG itself began as a reactionary movement against marginalized communities in gaming, and that those communities did not just go away. Just as women (Chess 2017), people of color (K. Gray 2014), and LGBT gamers and internet users (Ruberg 2020) have continued to create and consume gaming and adjacent media, so too have the often-overlapping adherents to the political left. One of the primary sites of this counternarrative can be found on YouTube, the most mainstream platform which, as previously noted, has been largely blamed for giving voice to gaming reactionaries.[12] The informal community of leftist YouTube creators known as 'BreadTube' or 'LeftTube' rose to prominence in the wake of GamerGate, although it is hard to pin down exactly when. BreadTubers are known best debunking for right-wing talking points and discussing critical theory in an easy-to-access way, usually in the format of "video essay" which combines in-depth analysis with engaging visual aid (Kuznetsov and Ismangil 2020). This YouTube movement has since its inception garnered millions of viewers and lays a clear example for how to create leftist, especially video, media online successfully.

1.8 The livestreaming left

Sometimes categorized as a part of BreadTube itself, despite being centered on a different platform and format, leftist political livestreaming initially took root on the platform largely in the form of debate channels during the Donald Trump presidency. These channels found the streamer arguing politics and theory with liberal and right-wing content creators alike from across the internet. Like with BreadTube video producers, Twitch's leftists largely anchor their views in critical theory, and remix tactics from across political and media history to reach audiences (Kuznetsov and Ismangil 2020).

While the cause for leftist Twitch's rise in popularity can only be speculated on, the growth of political audiences on the platform has continued along with the growth of the platform beyond esports, and the growth of the popularity of livestreaming more broadly. As with the coincidence of Rush Limbaugh's ascendence to talk radio stardom, in which the wider American political context and his formal novelty aligned perfectly for popular success (Rosenwald 2019) – Twitch's lefties, and Hasan Piker especially, seemed to have stumbled into success more than initially seeking it out. In addition, the decentralized, creator economy of new social platforms allows for leftists to create their own broadcasts without the need for any institutional legitimacy, bypassing the moderating gatekeeping of neoliberal media corporations. And, while streamers like

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[12] The popularly held belief, however, that YouTube itself *pushed* its users to radicalization is still a hotly contested subject. While many users of the site still claim that this "pipeline" to radical content was happening in the early 2010's, and continues to some extent today, recent work has demonstrated that YouTube's algorithm promotes mainstream political outlets over fringe voices (Ledwich and Zaitsev 2020).

Piker had dedicated niche followings prior, a series of outside events around the 2020 U.S. presidential election set them on a path to popularity.

The clearest inflection point came on October 19th, 2020 when popular democratic socialist congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez tweeted out a call for collaborators on a "get out the vote" outreach project: "Anyone want to play Among Us with me on Twitch to get out the vote? (I've never played but it looks like a lot of fun)" (Ocasio-Cortez 2020). Assumedly, she and her team recognized that Twitch reached a large, young audience and simultaneously the potency of the moment's *Among Us* video game trend which aligned conveniently with the GOTV message of voting's importance. Piker replied to her tweet with a simple "hi!" (Piker 2020b), along with Piker's fellow streamer 'Neekolul' (neekolul🍒 2020b) who had gone viral earlier in the year supporting democratic socialist presidential hopeful Bernie Sanders (neekolul🍒 2020a), and Ocasio-Cortez' fellow left-wing congresswoman Ilhan Omar (Omar 2020). The very next day saw Ocasio-Cortez thanking Piker at the start of what would be a record-breaking livestream – peaking at 435,000 concurrent viewers on Ocasio-Cortez' channel, but with far more viewers distributed across all participating streamers' channels (Kastrenakes 2020b). The stream, in terms of peak viewers, entered the top 10 most-watched streams of all time on stream-metric tracking site TwitchTracker (Kastrenakes 2020b).

With the contentious 2020 election following in the next several weeks, Piker retained some of the *Among Us* event's massive audience and received coverage in the popular press for his adaptable news coverage (Jackson 2020; Lorenz 2020). Following Joe Biden's victory, Piker has maintained his audience despite critics' warnings that he would have less to talk about when a liberal was in power by critiquing Biden from a socialist perspective. Where #GamerGaters connected with young, white online audiences through right-wing scapegoating of marginalized groups, Piker explains events and politics to his viewers through conversational, "[dialectical] materialism" rather than "talking points" (Kelly 2021). This ability to analyze media off-the-cuff, rather than rely on a script or post-production editing, alludes to a certain sincerity that accompanies the temporality of liveness which uniquely lends itself to grounded, left-wing criticism, a quality discussed further in this thesis' third chapter and conclusion.

By wedding affordances of their predecessors with tactics developed for the political discourse of the internet, Twitch's political streamers and their audiences are able to affect discourse both on the platform and in the communities around it. Piker brings to his stream, for example, the playful and fiery rhetoric of talk radio, the visual language and institutional knowledge of partisan TV news, a familiarity with online political interaction, the genre of the reaction video, and a history of debate – among other things. He combines them with the tools and preexisting "gamer" culture of Twitch to give his audience a sort of "let's play" of the day's politics and online content. Operating in concert with his audience through a not-quite-parasocial, but rather "cyber-social" relationship of highly-mediated sociality (Scheibe et al. 2022), Piker enters a mode of playful pedagogy which he uses to elucidate and break down the complexities of contemporary, especially online, hyperreality. Walking through his own political consumption on stream, Piker remains relatable to his audience as he "babysits" them (Jackson 2020). While he critically narrates his media diet, he also replicates what is likely the most common way that his viewers also get their information: flipping through

tabs of social media and legacy outlets. Through the chat, his audience can engage with him directly to ask questions, critique his view, or simply troll him (see: chapter 3).

Different streamers specialize in different content, and take different ideological stances, too. Piker, the most popular, takes an unspecified socialist approach and streams a variety of content from news to video games to "irl streams" in which he broadcasts himself navigating places beyond his home studio. Streamers like the self-described "libertarian-socialist" Vaush continue the "debate" genre, engaging in combative approaches which target their audience members and other content creators. MikefromPA's central_committee covers news exclusively, taking a democratic socialist ideological tact. Other left-wing figures and projects like Chelsea Manning, Jordan Uhl, *Street Fight Radio*, *Chapo Trap House*, *QAnonAnonymous* and *The Serfs* have actively taken up streaming to some extent or another to build their audiences and collaborate with the format's bigger, aforementioned names. On the other hand, Piker specifically has collaborated with other non-political streamers extensively – from the most popular figures on Twitch like XqC, Mizkif, and Pokimane, to those with sway in specific communities like *The Needle Drop*'s Anthony Fantano. Through these sorts of connections, despite the newness phenomenon of political streaming, big-name political streamers and others have effectively created an environment which allows for leftists to flourish in the format as creators and as audiences.

1.9 Looking ahead

In this chapter I have chronicled the technical and cultural building blocks leading to the emergence of political livestreaming, from partisan talk radio to today. Leftist political livestreaming combines elements of its explicitly political predecessors with the technical affordances of a platform built for competitive gaming as a response, in part, to the right wing's grip on online political discourse post-#GamerGate. In the next chapter, I explore the political economy of Twitch as a platform for political discourse and content creation beyond gaming: its public facing and audience labor; payment processing and incentives; and moderation practices.

Chapter 2: Economy of bits

2.1 Monetizing personal politics

While recent years have seen a rise in the popularity and use of livestreaming video, turning it into a mainstay of internet media consumption, the COVID-19 pandemic increased audience sizes for livestreaming significantly, with viewership trending up sharply by all metrics from Q1 to Q2 of 2020 across platforms and maintaining that growth (May 2021). Twitch, already the most popular streaming platform, now dwarfs its competitors in YouTube Gaming and Facebook Gaming.

 While livestreaming culture has largely developed out of video game streaming (see Taylor 2018), and still heavily skews towards it in terms of content, livestreaming technologies like Twitch afford their users – both streamer and viewer – productive and consumptive uses beyond those for which it is designed explicitly (Shaw 2017). One such affordance which has seen a significant rise in profile since the 2020 United States presidential election is the use of Twitch to stream content explicitly oriented towards political news and commentary, rather than video games (Lorenz 2020; Jackson 2020; Browning 2021; Tran et al. 2021). Using a miscellaneous category of stream such as "Just Chatting" or "Talk Shows & Podcasts," rather than streaming a video game, political streamers have created their own communities on the platform.

 As discussed in the introduction, the most-watched of these emergent, politically-minded Twitch content-creators is self-described socialist Hasan Piker. According to documents leaked from Twitch and acquired by hackers[13] in October 2021, and confirmed by creators themselves, Piker was ranked the thirteenth highest paid streamer overall on the site, grossing over $2.8 million between August 2019 and October 2021 from direct Twitch payouts alone (Miceli 2021). While Piker is easily the highest paid of these political streamers, there are networks of smaller political channels which operate in a similar capacity to his own, as well as in other capacities. For example: the popular leftist podcast *Chapo Trap House*, which makes over $160,000 per on the membership-oriented content platform Patreon and is the second most popular project hosted there, uses its Twitch channel to cover live media events, host bi-weekly "CushVlog" conversational dialogues, and even promote their own e-sports team, "ChapoFYM." Twitch, in uses like this, operates as an auxiliary platform to other larger projects – in the case of *Chapo*, their Patreon podcast. The opposite is true as well: Piker and other streamers often will diversify their media output to other platforms, while using Twitch as their home-base. Piker's YouTube channel, which hosts edited 10-20 minute clips of previous livestreams boasts over 800k subscribers at the time of writing, and at its most recent monthly peak in July 2021 gained over 13 million video views ("HasanAbi" 2021). Piker is also a co-host of the weekly YouTube show and podcast, *The Leftovers*, created by H3H3 Productions, a YouTube channel of over 1.4 million subscribers, which is styled after political talk television (Social Blade 2021) – as

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[13] While using hacked data is sometimes questionably ethical (Connor 2015), in this case these are already public figures – and in many cases data about their incomes was already public in some way, whether it be public subscription numbers or public announcements. This particular data was circulated widely, and also discussed in specificity, as well as confirmed, by its subjects.

well as his own news-commentary podcast *Fear and Malding* hosted with fellow, non-politics Twitch streamer Will Neff, which is part of the Kast podcast network.

Piker's success on Twitch illustrates a) the increasing audiences for political discourse on Twitch, and b) that the platforms creators generate significant income not just from their livestreaming success, but also their tangential projects across other media formats. As Twitch and streamers experience increasing growth, their cultural impact is likely to increase as well. The interpersonal dramatics between Twitch personalities like Piker and others such as VaushVidya and Destiny[14], are regularly trending topics on Twitter, and elicit mainstream news coverage. However, the ways in which figures like these generate income from their streams, and how livestreaming platforms such as Twitch and its parent companies, in this case Amazon, affect the content on them through distributing said income, has not been a site of much comment.

The livestreaming audience, too, is an integral part of the economy of Twitch – perhaps even more so than in legacy broadcasting. As T.L. Taylor notes of 'chat' in her analysis of Twitch esports culture: "It is the real-time dynamic exchange not just between broadcaster and audience, but the audience members with each other too" (2018, 43). The chat function is "central" to the platform (Taylor 2018, 42), often even manifesting as a part of the video feed itself, put there by the streamer using live-editing tools in order to demonstrate their own specific engagements with audience members. Through this, the audience is not only commodified post-hoc, but is actively creating a significant portion of any given broadcast's content.

With the growth of livestreaming platforms, the number of political creators on those platforms, and those creators' audiences in mind, I aim to investigate Twitch's political economy on three fronts in this chapter. First, I investigate how both streamer labor and audience labor are configured on Twitch, and how it differs from its legacy media counterparts. Then, I analyze the transfer of money on from audiences to streamers, and streamers to Twitch – and how that transfer is incentivized. From there, I critique the way that Twitch is able to leverage its media power over political messages on the platform through content moderation.

While Twitch is a difficult site of study because of the sheer amount of both visual, like TV before it (Levine 2020, 14-15), and textual content contained on it, these large amounts of data can be broken down for easier analysis by honing in on broader media events. Both those events which directly involve Twitch, such as the Twitter spat between Piker and rapper Nicki Minaj over COVID-19 vaccines or 'CrackerGate,' and those which featured much more heavily in traditional outlets, such as the January 6th insurrection, in this chapter provide useful, semi-discrete sites through which to analyze interactions between Twitch, its streamers, and their audiences. Implicit in this, as well, is an analysis of the mechanics which exist on the platform to process money from viewers through the platform to streamers.

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[14] Not all streamers associate their brand with their given name, or even make their given name public, so in many cases I will be using streamers' usernames to refer to them.

2.2 Method

Studying digital platforms is a challenge in part because scholars are only able to view as much of their operations as are made publicly visible. As a result, analysis tools more oriented towards the 'socio' element of sociotechnical systems are more easily applicable. Twitch is no exception to this rule. While there is an added element of transparency beyond many other media formats because of how streamers are mediate their experiences in real time, even then the only publicly available data is what Twitch publishes and streamers say of their own experiences. Because of this, the analytical tools used in this chapter will sit somewhere in the realm of discourse analysis, filtered through the lens of platform studies (Gillespie 2018; Helmond 2015; Bogost and Montfort 2009). In my analysis I take into account not just the text which Twitch as a company uses to describe its relationship with streamers, but also statements from streamers about the economic elements of their own stream, news about Twitch's economics, and my own observations about how Twitch content is generated.

It is also important to underscore at just how many levels Twitch's political economy can be analyzed – and how the scope of this project is intentionally focused in on a) one specific genre of Twitch stream, and b) the way that Twitch, as a platform, handles labor and exerts power over public-facing laborers working within that genre. The elements of content use and intellectual property rights, as well as infrastructural development and maintenance work, would be too much to cover in this project, although they would be worthwhile sites for future analyses.

2.3 Making money on Twitch

As referenced earlier, key to understanding the baseline mechanics of Twitch is T.L. Taylor's *Watch Me Play* – a descriptive work on the mechanical workings of Twitch as they relate to e-sports livestreaming. *Watch Me Play* situates Twitch within the larger context of broadcast mediums to which critical political economic analyses have been applied. Taylor describes video game livestreaming as "networked broadcasting," "audiences – and their interactions with broadcasters – […] themselves becoming integrated into the entertainment" (6). The mode through which this networked broadcasting manifests, she says, is the "[transformation of] private play into public entertainment" (6). This public turn is the key linkage between Twitch, and livestreaming more generally, and media commonly described as 'broadcast.' While certainly anyone can play a video game online and make their screen available for anyone to watch via a livestream, Taylor identifies that there is a necessarily aspirational quality which separates that practice from a television network broadcast. There must be a substantive public which consumes the livestream in order for it to take on such qualities, and when the "aspiration to transform otherwise-private play" (10) is successful and no longer aspirational, the more personally-oriented livestream has become a *broadcast*.

Taylor also discusses the specific affordances that Twitch provides to users on both sides of the video feed in order to participate in the viewing experience, and to viewers to contribute monetarily to a stream's 'creator.' Fundamentally, like so much else in

online media, Twitch makes the bulk of its money through either the service of, or the payment to avoid the service of, advertisements. There are three levels of streamer on Twitch: unclassified, low-level streamers; Twitch "partners"; and Twitch "affiliates." Low-level streamers are those who have not amassed a regular enough following to receive a share of ad-revenue, as defined by Twitch. Once these streamers reach certain benchmarks, they are admitted to the "Twitch Partner Program" (TPP), at which point they receive a cut of the ad revenue from their streams. At an unclear interval following that, the most popular streamers are chosen from the TPP to become Twitch affiliates with negotiable contracts that dictate their ad frequency and revenue cut, among other things (Taylor 2018, 116-117).

Partners and affiliates may also receive subscriptions from their audience members who wish to pay a monthly fee of $5 to avoid ads on any specific channel. Streamers usually split the income these subscriptions 50/50 with the platform (Gwilliam 2021b). Additionally, viewers may purchase "gift subs" for other users, either specifically or randomly within a community – usually in some amount of bulk. Channel subscribers often receive some kind of social marker and access to additional features within their subscribed channel as well: icons to denote their subscription and how many months consecutively they've been subscribed; access to "subscriber only" chat, and cross-platform perks such as access to an official Discord server.[15] Additionally, Amazon has pushed selling subscriptions significantly since its purchase of the company in 2014, including one free subscription per month for subscribers to Amazon Prime (Taylor 2018, 119).

There are other "official" Twitch-enabled sources of income. "Bits," for example, are tips that are sent directly to the streamer – with Twitch operating as the intermediary payment platform. Twitch takes a large percent of each of these tips as well (Craven 2021). When users donate in this way they are often met with an on-stream "thank you" graphic and/or text-to-speech message (Taylor 2018, 123). Amazon also has provided streamers with affiliate links to specific products, giving them a cut of whatever sales they refer (119).

Beyond Twitch-sanctioned income, streamers have creatively supplemented their income through other means. Paid sponsorships from brands looking for promotion on stream are common as well, circumventing the cut from advertisements which Twitch takes from their native implementation. The leftist news channel Central_Committee run by left-wing influencer MikefromPA, for example, has a sponsorship arrangement with the socialist publication *Jacobin Magazine*. Like most sponsorships, the details are undisclosed or not easily accessible, however *Jacobin* offers his viewers a discounted rate on subscriptions, have a dedicated command in his chat linking to its site, and its logo appears at most times in his video overlay. Alternatively, streamers may take alternative routes to generate income such through external tip services like Ko-Fi, or through other monthly subscription services such as Patreon.

The utilization of in-group demarcations to push subscription sales is a key aspect of the political economy of Twitch. The graphical elements that accompany Twitch channel subscriptions serve as formal demarcations of group membership within the participatory culture of any given channel (Jenkins 2009, xi). These sorts of "rewards"

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[15] Discord is a messaging and A/V chat app developed for video game communities which, similar to Twitch, has found success even outside of them.

for subscription represent a marketization of seemingly legitimate participation, especially in the case of "subscriber-only" mode, at which point viewers must pay for access to participate directly.[16] The connection between participatory culture and audience labor is not a new one (E. Fisher 2015; Caraway 2011), however it has not been considered in this context, where the audience is directly and immediately commodified as the content itself, on top of traditional considerations. While Taylor discusses "audience work" on Twitch (2018, 44-48), genres of livestream which directly incorporate real-time audience contribution, which have risen in popularity since 2018, require further critique. In many streams categorized as "just chatting," particularly with respect to news or political content, audience members also work to fact check and source materials for the stream, and act as conversational or debate partners for the streamer. These audience contributions go far beyond the "measuring" and "rating" functions of previous audience commodity interaction (Andrejevic 2013, 194-195) – making responses visible directly to the platform and the streamer as they are created.

Jenkins describes phenomena such as this in his 2006 book *Convergence Culture*. "Media convergence," to Jenkins, describes

> "the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want."
>
> *(Jenkins 2006, 2)*

Political Twitch streams exemplify this media convergence, with content on it "*co-constituted* through spectators, producers, and texts" (Taylor 2018, 47), as well as through the affordances of the platform itself. Analyzing the economy of such a convergent platform requires an attention to all of these aspects – something to which critical political economy seems poised well to do.

In this convergence framework, "producers" and "spectators" are collapsed, but there is still a distinction to be made between the streamer and their audience. This relationship is related directly to that of television and film, to which the concept of an "audience commodity" is directly relevant. First described by Dallas Smythe, this concept posits that audiences are themselves are products bought and sold for advertising purposes, among others, between media corporations (1977, 3). Building on this, the demographic and viewership-habit data of audiences is collected and commodified by advertising industry with increased efficiency (Andrejevic 2002). In the case of Twitch, audiences are more directly active than previous broadcast mediums, and even previous internet media (Fuchs 2012) – making the site of commodification also a site of active labor. The entanglement of these two may at first seem hard to reconcile, but actually demonstrates the multiple exploitation of these audiences by both streamers and Twitch as a platform.

Streamers themselves are exploited as laborers as well, spending long hours generating content and maintaining attention as independent contractors for Twitch (Taylor 2018, 135). Similar to journalists, particularly freelance journalists', relationship with newspapers, corporate ownership has the possibility of limiting streamers'

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[16] While certainly sub-only mode provides streamers with a useful gatekeeping tool to keep out harassment or make the discourse more readable, the exclusionary effect it has cannot be ignored.

expression of political opinions which are critical of their platform. New media barons can exert their influence, even passively, by threatening to remove or ban streamers from the platform, thereby cutting off their source of income if they threaten any aspect of the neoliberal consensus, or, more likely, Amazon's bottom line. This sort of chilling effect, while not as directly enforced as in newsrooms, is implied at all corners of platforms – a part of a greater trend In which "media ownership [by elites becomes] a significant proxy for media power" (Freedman 2014, 51). Politically oriented streams are, of course, the most susceptible to this influence – while a gauche comment by a video game streamer might be written off as a display of ignorance, journalists and commentators on the platform need be wary of what they say, as their content implies that there is a certain level of intentionality which is not assumed in others'.[17]

The textual element of the stream is perhaps the strangest but most approachable for analysis. Most streams on Twitch feature a video game as the "text" in question, remediating the experience of the streamer's gameplay with commentary. Political streamers, on the other hand, follow something similar to a "reaction" style format (Werner 2012; S. Anderson 2011), in which they broadcast their response to news media, and other political, media artifacts such as newspaper stories, journalistic broadcasts, and online political discourse.

2.4 Live labor: streamers and audiences

Twitch's hybrid, networked broadcasting system has created a new configuration of labor between content production and that content's audience. Where TV news studios are supported by often large production staff bodies, streams appear as solitary sites of production. Indeed, streamers are expected to manage the many layers of production that a stream entails on their own: set design, performance, critique and evaluation, sociality, material and digital infrastructure, and economic and commercial frameworks (Taylor 2018, 73-79). This material labor, which would be distributed across many in traditional broadcasting, is consolidated into one person, or a few people.

In its live format, Twitch also incentivizes long broadcast periods and regimented broadcast schedules. This is stressed first in the requirements for monetization advancement. In order to reach the level of 'Twitch partner' streamers are required to stream for 25 hours across 12 different days with, crucially, an average of 75 concurrent viewers ("Achievements" n.d.). While initially this may seem like a fairly low bar, consider that streamers initially are not able to monetize their channel, meaning that it is impossible for a streamer to be paid until they reach 'affiliate' level, and following that they must dedicate more time to laboring on Twitch in order to be allowed to even apply for the next, more sustainable rung of "partner." The incentive towards length can be

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[17] The context for this is not worth explaining in depth here, but essentially stems from the idea of a "heated gaming moment" – in which a gaming content creator gets so invested in the game that they exclaim a slur or otherwise uncouth utterance in a fit of passion. These kinds of gaffes are often considered 'apolitical,' excused, or quickly forgotten for gaming streamers (Mulkerin 2017; "Heated Gaming Moment" n.d.). My point here is that for leftist political influencers, *any* gaffes are permanently seared into the cultural memory because of the political backdrop they happen on and because they are useful as weapons for right wing, bad faith actors.

seen in the way that Twitch values concurrent viewers over total views, unlike its static video counterpart YouTube (Burgess and Green 2018, 87-93). The availability of a stream's live feed, in this configuration, is put at a premium – the more reliably it is available, the more likely it is to garner viewers. The issue here being that without the assurance of payment, the time which streamers may be able or willing to allot streaming is limited by their individual financial situations. This pressure is heightened in the paratextual labor required of streamers, who, in order to grow their audience, are required to engage with them off-stream as well – on top of the clerical work associated with running what amounts to a live community forum (Taylor 2018, 115).

Of course, streamers at an elevated level in Twitch hierarchy are more easily able to make themselves available live to viewers as well – just as they are able to monetize more effectively. Twitch affiliates' streams are recorded and stored for 14 days following their initial run, making them available to viewers without the need for manual reupload onto other platforms. Twitch partners have an extended 60-day storage period as well, and can rebroadcast previously streamed content, taking their channels live even when they themselves are not. The number of concurrent viewers on streams which are live is the main metric for Twitch's algorithmic sorting as well, with the top streams of any given category featured on the front page above others in searches. This economy of availability is not to be confused with the 'attention economy,' although they are related. If the attention economy is modeled after a theory of attention as a limited resource (Terranova 2000; Davenport and Beck 2001; Andrejevic 2002; 2013), Twitch operates in some ways as a collective intelligence (Jenkins 2006, 27; Lévy 1997, 13-15) tool to filter that attention via its availability-based streaming labor. Political streamers mediate flows of information for the stream viewership, negotiating their own attention resource based on their availability and the direct input of their audience.

The livestreaming audience and how Twitch centers it are the platform's largest divergences from other media formats. The term audience industries is used in television studies to describe the marketing of predicted or actual audiences surrounding a broadcast (Gray and Lotz 2018, 63). In livestreaming, however, this concept is pushed beyond just the industry marketing audiences which *surround* a broadcast to the audience as an industrial, productive element *within* the broadcast. This direct, immediate incorporation of the audience into the content of the stream occurs on several levels which each have their own implications for audience labor.

Just-in-time and live television broadcast networks covering similar news and political genres have entire teams of staff – journalists, editors, sub-editors, producers, technical staff – ensuring that the content of the broadcast is accurate and flowing smoothly (Cummings 2014; Baisnée and Marchetti 2006). If anything, the production of political broadcasts on Twitch is more reminiscent of "one-person-band" local news reportage, in which a single individual performs "both the technical and the editorial functions that were previously performed by two or more people" (Adams 2007). This is different too, though, in that there is still an element of technical assembly after the fact which turns collected materials into broadcast-able segments. The liveness of livestreaming inhibits streamers' ability to edit their content, with a 15 minute broadcast delay only available to Twitch partners ("Achievements" n.d.). Even then, unlike its television counterparts, the stream delay is not editable as it is designed specifically to discourage video game cheating, instead of as a tactic to censor content which breaks

FCC regulations (Levi 2008, 27). The lack of newsroom staff that manages similar television media pushes the content sourcing, screening, and assembly work all onto the streamer themselves on top of the work of presentation and audience management.

Viewers frequently volunteer their own labor, both collectively and as individuals, to fill in the gap of content sourcing, creation, editing, and other tasks usually performed live by a team in a newsroom or television studio. Focusing in on Hasan Piker's broadcast, if a video being watched on stream might break Twitch's terms of service (TOS), viewers will alert Piker to the timestamp that the video breaks TOS so that he might skip that section and avoid repercussions (Piker 2019). Likewise, if the content or para-content of the stream might be objectionable, the audience might react as such or offer corrections. In the case of the Nicki Minaj dispute, for example, users in Piker's Twitch chat warned him in real time that a Tweet he was drafting on-stream could be read differently than he intended, preventing him from posting the message on Twitter (Ostonox 2021c). Alternatively, during live news events, such as during the January 6th 2021 U.S. capitol riot, the audience operates as a news gathering collective – sourcing and fact checking material from across the internet, and then sending in the live chat for Piker to present (PIker 2021a). Even outside of these events, viewers regularly source and submit videos for Piker to react to on-stream and re-mediate as content. All of this is in addition to traditional audience commodity labor, which too is harnessed in the production of the stream. The practice of "emote spamming" in the live chat by viewers to react to the content on stream and the streamer's interaction with it, as well as various other metrics like live concurrent viewer counts, makes more readily available visualizations of how different content effects viewership numbers. This data, highly sought after by advertisers and other media producers (Andrejevic 2013; 2002), is voluntarily provided by viewers as a result of the culture cultivated by Twitch streamers in which content appears democratically affected by audience reaction (Wang and Li 2020).

2.5 Participatory payment

Audiences have the option of paying for the ostensibly "free" content they consume on Twitch as well. Paying for content is incentivized by Twitch and by individual streamers through rewards, cultural bonuses, and negative tools. These are used by political streamers like Piker to encourage subscriptions, as their content offers fewer opportunities for brand sponsorships compared to e-sports. In addition, as left-wing politics are the most visibly popular on the platform, taking money from typical product-pushing sponsors unnecessarily would risk losing audience members (Piker and Neff, 2021). Many streamers even keep their monthly subscription numbers publicly live as a textual element of their stream's video feed to maintain transparency about how much money they make. Piker demonstrated this after receiving backlash in the wake of the Twitch income leaks, "can't wait for [people] to be mad at me about my publicly available sub count again" (Grayson 2021). Piker subsequently trended on Twitter anyway, as onlookers made the argument that it was against his socialist political ideology to make that amount of money, with many of his followers using his publicly available subscriber count in defense of his ethics. This itself is notable, as no other

individual streamers trended following the leaks in such a critical capacity – illustrating the precarious public relations that come with the territory.

Nevertheless, the money being made through Twitch directly comes from two places, ad revenue and direct payments from viewers. Payments from viewers come in the form of either monthly subscriptions or tips, which are called 'bits' on the platform. While the breakdown in the amount of money made between these different types is not publicly available, streamers' most consistent stream of money is through $5 subscriptions, as ad revenue fluctuates depending on the time of year (Taylor 2018, 116-117). Depending on streamers' contracts with Twitch, ads may be more or less common. Piker, for example, bargained with Twitch to minimize the number of ads per hour of his stream to one per hour for 60 seconds, the smallest ad requirement among the top 100 Twitch streamers (C. Bennett 2021). The inconsistency of ad revenue makes subscription-based income more lucrative and sustainable for streamers and Twitch itself.

Rewards are the most obvious way that Twitch and its streamers encourage subscriptions. These are the direct, advertised goods that subscribers get in exchange for payment. Advertisement avoidance is the most notable and universally available subscription reward. While on streams such as Piker's, where ads are served to viewers minimally, this is less of an issue – on other channels with three to five ads an hour, avoiding ads is a main draw to subscription. Subscribers also get: access to custom channel emotes, the Twitch term for in line emoji; badges indicating the number of months they have been subscribed for before their names in the chat; access to external resources like Discord servers for subscribers; and the ability to send messages when a streamer sets their chat to "subscriber only" mode. In addition, subscribing during "hype train" events, gamified promotions which encourage reaching a subscription goal, allows participants to use other special emotes.

The visible symbols of subscription status operate as more than just gifts for the subscriber themself, but also operate as exterior signifiers of status within any channel's community – both to other audience members and to the streamer themselves. Subscriber badges make users more visible as they contribute to discussion, and formalize membership hierarchy (Boyd 2002). "Gift sub[scription]s" are another way that this manifests, in which users gain prominence within the channel's cultural milieu by gifting subscriptions at random to other users *en masse*. This function often results in a 'thank you' message being read aloud live by the streamer, and takes up visible space in the chat – raising gifters' usernames to the forefront. These cultural bonuses of subscription work in tandem with the stated rewards as the deeper reason for buying subscriptions, promising the incentive of relative notoriety, or seniority, within the community.

Negative tools, on the other hand, push subscriptions through making the livestream consumption experience worse. Not subscribing has specific drawbacks which can prevent viewers from participating in the stream or make participation more challenging – further incentivizing subscription. Obviously, interruptions in viewing by ads can prevent non-subscribed viewers from content which itself inhibits participation. While tactics to circumvent ads such as adblockers and virtual private networks (VPNs) are common, their use is punished by Twitch, which freezes the video feed, reduces the stream's bitrate, and/or serves anti-adblocker ads if it detects them ("The Ad Experience

on Twitch" n.d.; Stephen 2020b). Non-subscribed users also are less visible in the chat, their less ornately decorated usernames and inability to access emotes without third-party extensions making their contributions undervalued compared to their subscribed counterparts, even earning them the pejorative "greyname" in reference to their un-customized username.

These altogether operate as strong motivators for subscription, which shows in the data. Piker's monthly subscriptions as of writing hover around 51,000 – which is almost double his average weekly number of concurrent viewers, around 28,000, and higher even than his peak concurrent viewership of around 39,000 ("HasanAbi - Streamer Overview & Stats" 2021). Twitch, and streamers, take advantage of their audiences' investment and "active stake in the culture produced" (Jenkins 2009, 12) by participatory culture on the platform to encourage spending money on subscriptions, despite already performing free labor for both the platform and for individual streamers.

Twitch, in this relationship, seems to gain the most from the surplus value generated by streamer and audience labor – taking a cut of both subscriptions and donation payments made to streamers from audiences, taking a cut from ad revenue generated from streams, and harvesting user data. How much the company makes from these sources specifically is not clear, but what is clear is that the company is growing significantly year-over-year at the expense of streamers and audiences alike (Stephen 2021).

2.6 Moderate moderation

Through the way it handles labor and payments, Twitch operates as a platform that manages user content and interaction without creating it for profit (Gillespie 2018, 18). It controls the pathways by which its streamers make money and the ways its audiences can access content. Necessarily, this management is done through moderation of both streamers and audiences – moderation being an integral part of platforms (21). For genres of livestream that are not explicitly political, Twitch moderation tries to curtail abusive practices like hate speech and harassment; on political channels it becomes dicier, sometimes affecting the political message of the content.

Twitch's community guidelines forbid a number of things which are widely interpretable by moderators including: breaking the law when using the site; self-destructive behavior; violence and threats; hateful conduct and harassment; unauthorized sharing of private information; malicious conduct; sexual content; and extreme violence, gore, and other obscene conduct ("Community Guidelines" 2021). These guidelines are highly flexible and interpretable, and frequently come under scrutiny when it comes to political content on the platform. Twitch can bend many of its terms of service to fit its needs, so that if its users step too far out of line the company can levy power against them to save face. Piker himself notably was caught up in one of these judgements, earning a seven-day suspension in 2019 after ridiculing Texas Rep. Dan Crenshaw's foreign policy stances by mocking an injury he received while fighting in the Middle East and saying that America brought the 9/11 attacks upon itself (Grayson 2019b). While Piker did not show any content on stream which directly broke the platform's TOS or call for violence against Crenshaw, he was suspended nonetheless, with Twitch not offering a public reason. While this is a rare occurrence,

such a high-profile example has made streamers vigilant to avoid such incendiary language.

The element of liveness when covering news as it happens also makes Twitch a dangerous place for streamers. Covering the January 6th insurrection, Piker frequently had to hide live video feeds from the ground or from television news channels when he predicted it would be too violent for the platform. The view held by many leftists online is that their anti-capitalist views are inconvenient for platforms, which makes their presence in such places a courtesy more than an assurance. While hard to prove, the lack of transparency also makes anecdotal evidence to this matter hard to argue, especially as corporate platform leaders "flirt with fascism" (Dencik 2014). There is precedent for such removals too – the YouTube ban of media watchdog group Right Wing Watch for hateful conduct, even as the videos it critiqued remained live on the platform, demonstrates just how criticism can be flattened to remove left-wing media (Rawnsley 2021). The reliance on community reporting and volunteer moderation on online platforms is also frequently abused by the right-wing, as the subjects of criticism and their followers mass report critical videos and accounts, or those they simply disagree with, to have them removed automatically, and incorrectly, by algorithmic means (Gillespie 2018, 91-95).

This abuse of community reporting seems to have been made clear in the late 2021 incident on Piker's broadcast which has since come to be known as "CrackerGate." The series of events began when several of Piker's moderators of color were banned by Twitch for using the word "cracker" in the live chat to describe white participants of a video Piker was watching on-stream, the reasoning being that "cracker," to Twitch, was a racial slur. When Piker himself defended his moderators' use of the word on stream, saying that it was not on the level of racial slurs for people of color, he received a seven-day suspension as well (Gach 2021). Several other streamers were then banned for discussing the controversy, including the white libertarian socialist Vaush, who had said the 'n-word' on-stream previously (Jackson and Gault 2021; Thalen 2021). Piker attributed the event's origin to a brigade of white, right-wing "naysayers [who] whipped themselves up into a frenzy" over the term and were "doing touchdown end-zone dances" when he was suspended, "joking about how not-severe the term cracker was" rather than reiterating its severity (Hissong 2021). This prohibition on "cracker" demonstrates the interpretability of TOS by corporations and the abusability of a reliance on community moderation, especially by bad-faith actors.

Another tactic commonly used to avoid removal by left-wing commentators on Twitch is a disclaimer as part of the stream's video itself. Journalists covering the right-wing Qanon conspiracy movement, 'Liv Agar' and the hosts of *QAnonAnonymous* comment on Qanon content regularly via Twitch with the disclaimer "we do not endorse the contents of this video. we are watching it for the purposes of analysis." Because their content shows banned behavior, and has been banned from other platforms mistakenly, this is intended to ward off similar reports on Twitch (QAA Podcast 2020), despite the fact that Twitch continues to host right-wing extremists themselves (Browning 2021), albeit to a significantly smaller audience than left-wing commentators.

Nevertheless, the effect of the constant possibility of bans, however arbitrary, seems to produce some kind of chilling effect on the content of political Twitch streams. As with corporate ownership of any media, Amazon's 2014 purchase of Twitch imbued its

community standards not just with the interests of Amazon, but with "media power": the "power of social actors to influence the discursive power of the media" (Hardy 2014, 197). In this circumstance, the media power of Amazon, given its status as the world's largest multi-national corporation, as well as the mechanism which pays Twitch streamers, is significant. Through moderation tools that can effect streamers' access to income, Amazon via Twitch *could* enforce its political agenda directly by banning or suspending those promoting critical content, or simply that which they disagreed with. Initial analysis of the similar takeover of *The Washington Post* by Amazon in 2013 showed that the publication covered Amazon less than its counterparts (Weitz et al. 2019). While Piker, as the largest political streamer, does not shy away from criticizing Amazon for now, the corporate ownership of the platform raises concerns about how critical and independent commentators can remain should Twitch's parent decide to crack down – especially as untransparent moderation already keeps political voices on edge.

2.7 Conclusions and challenges

While it would be impossible to analyze the complete political economy of a platform like Twitch which is constantly shifting and adapting – on top of the individual agreements between affiliates and the company, which comprise a range of different concessions – this aims to be a preliminary look into a specific sector of content generated and consumed on the site. As was demonstrated at the beginning of this chapter, streamers like Hasan 'Hasanabi' Piker, Central_Committee, VaushVidya, and others regularly garner large, likely young, audiences to their politically-oriented streams. In the case of Piker, this has even included interfacing with prominent politicians and journalists directly (Tran et al. 2021). Journalists themselves, beyond these politics streamers, use the platform to connect directly with their users – for example, Jordan 'really_chill_guy' Uhl, notable for his contributions at *The Nation* and *The New York Times*, and US military whistleblower Chelsea 'xychelsea87' Manning can regularly be found on the platform discussing politics while playing the 'battle royale' blockbuster *Fortnite* or city planning simulator *Cities Skylines.*

    Still, this connectivity comes at a cost. Political audiences are commodified not just as such, but also as a part of the content themselves – volunteering, or even paying, to perform tasks traditionally completed by studio and newsroom. Twitch and its streamers levy audiences' active stake through participation in the content of the platform to raise subscription revenue. Plus, the looming threat of censorship or removal under the platform's TOS chills more critical content or incendiary coverage.

    Solutions to these problems are not clear, but are already being discussed by members of Twitch communities. The joke of "unionizing chat" has caught on in Piker's community, raising awareness for the labor that audiences perform directly for his stream – if in a tongue-in-cheek way (CreativeMischief 2020). Compensation for audience labor should be a first priority, especially as those already subscribed are not only creative workers in this paradigm but are also exploited by Twitch at the platform level. Beyond this, minimizing Amazon's potential influence over Twitch's critical voices and other media outlets through regulation or demerger would be a productive first step

at the larger level to ameliorate censorship of coverage critical of the platform's ownership.

Despite its problems, the convergence of different media formats and modes of engagement Twitch represents an increasingly relevant as a source of news content for young people in the post-print era. As such, the platform's political programming and its production requires further analysis to better understand the forces at work behind the scenes and their influence on what is publicly aired through them, and what is not. As of now, Twitch's political environment serves as a hopeful counterpoint to the right-wing culture of YouTube which was so pervasive in the 2010's (Conway, Scrivens, and Macnair 2019). That to say that the possibilities for Twitch are as progressive as they are not, and that with changes to the platform's model and ownership it can become more than just a place for leftist media to spread, but an equitable one. Hopefully this chapter has underscored the need for this research to continue and grow along with its site of study – as well as to serve as a jumping off point for that work.

2.8 Looking ahead

In this chapter I described political content on Twitch from a political economic perspective. I have looked at the ways public-facing labor manifests on both sides of the streaming communicative circuit, streamer and audience; how payment is processed and incentivized by Twitch's affordances and the platform itself; and how moderation is both used and abused by Twitch and its users. I have also spoken to the some of the issues, present and future, posed by the infrastructures undergirding Twitch – and how they pose a threat to particularly left-wing participation and growth on the platform going forward. The next chapter takes a markedly different approach. Building from this chapter's analysis, I will use a phenomenological framework in combination with text analytics to describe the experience of taking part in a livestream. Together these dueling analyses will hopefully present a better picture of political livestreaming culture today, as well as its practices and affective dimensions.

Chapter 3: Being-in-the-stream

3.1 A wide view of the stream

Livestreams, like live television, are experiences which are temporally situated in the moment during which they occur. Their video broadcast and synchronous chat elements flow from their beginning to their end across linear time, without deviation with the exception of infrastructural glitches. Livestreams, too, intimate a sense of place through their direct participatory element, despite their digitality. Streams, both deeply social and lengthy in terms of the time across which they take place, are simultaneously immersive and ambient. Like the experience of playing a mobile game, the stream is a virtual, hybrid world in which the active audience is simultaneously watching and constituting a part of the broadcast directly, however small – and in which the world of the stream becomes a part of their own lived environment (Keogh 2018, 55-57). The livestream as it exists today, as an assemblage of video feed and synchronous participatory chat, reframes the way which audiences participate in the worlds they are consuming: actively shaping and molding the direction of the stream through their participation.

While the stream's topics or directions of content may shift, or audience engagement may peak or lull, they are generally single, continuous programs which are, as previously discussed, incentivized to last for long periods of time. This is a change from broadcast TV, the channels on which discretely parse out time: portioning each program's timeslot-length, switching from one to the next at preordained moments. Streams, on the other hand, follow their own routines without a set schedule – stochastically changing from one topics or activity to the next. The analysis of these routines, is similar to Raymond Williams' of TV programming in the 1970's: taking each different "form of [program]," or section of a political stream's programming flow/routine, breaking it down into types of programming, and then analyzing those different types (1975, 78). My analysis returns to the walkthrough method (Light, Burgess, and Duguay 2018) as a guide, but takes a phenomenological approach to it, rather than a technical one: describing and analyzing each element of the stream's programming and culture in the order that they are experienced. With Hasan Piker's Twitch channel as my site of study, I walk through a queer autoethnography of my own experience in the stream (Cho 2015), combining it with the results of computational text analysis indicating how others are using the stream as well. In this analysis I hope to point towards a larger understanding of how audiences engage with political livestreams.

Unlike the previous chapter, my analysis here relies heavily on the Heideggerian concept of "care-structures" – grounding itself in a hermeneutics of trust, rather than suspicion (Scannell 2014, 25). While there are certainly power dynamics at play between streamer and audience which have the potential for exploitation, to describe the experience of everyday use itself one must trust that the stream will be reliably similar from day-to-day, that it will follow the precedent it sets for itself.

As I walk through Piker's stream, from before it begins until after it ends, it is important to remember as well that one stream may have many different audiences, which may use It differently or tune in for different content. Audience members interested in news will join the stream for news, or will join and ask for news coverage; those interested in video game content will do the same for gaming; etc. What makes political streamers interesting though, is that across the broad scope of the content they

create and remediate, beyond just news and political events, political analysis undergirds the structure of feeling of the stream (Williams 1977, 132-133). As I have already said, political livestreaming is about transforming private politics into public entertainment and discourse – but it is also at times about politicizing private entertainment. As we shall see across the course of this chapter, *everything* can be political.[18]

3.2 Before the stream

There are two ways in which audiences may find out about the stream's beginning – both of which require some investment in Hasan Piker as an individual, and which are valued differently within the culture of the stream: the live notification and the Twitter announcement. The first of these is the live notification. Live notifications are push notifications which notify a Twitch channel's followers, via their desktop or mobile device, that they have gone live on the platform. It notifies all followers simultaneously and immediately as soon as the channel starts broadcasting a video feed. The second way that viewers are notified is through social media posts announcing the stream's start.

There is a sort of social capital attributed to Twitch followers who tune in immediately from their notifications at the beginning of the stream. On Piker's stream, for example, there is a 15 to 20-minute delay between the stream beginning and the Twitter and Instagram announcements from his account. In this intervening period he shares personal life updates with his Twitch followers, intimating a closeness which is not made available to those who simply tune in from his transmedia audience. His stream regularly gains ~20,000 to 30,000 viewers from live notifications alone, but can gain tens of thousands more after he "blasts off" and tweets out his stream ("HasanAbi - Streams List and Statistics" 2022).[19]

Many streamers are also reliably live at certain times. Careerists like Piker have a set schedule that they follow, whereas content creators who do not rely on Twitch as a primary source of income might go live more sporadically. As with TV programming (Scannell 2014, 72), viewers trust that Piker will be reliably live at 11 a.m. Pacific time, 2 p.m. Eastern time. Disruptions to this schedule, large and small, are common, however. Streamers as "one-person-band" (Adams 2007) broadcasters who are able to control their own schedules often do so. Piker regularly takes time off for several days after burning out from the affective labor (Taylor 2018, 95-97) which streaming long hours requires (Piker 2022b; 2021a; 2021b; 2020a), or may simply be stuck doing errands and start their streams 30 minutes late (Piker 2022a; 2022c; 2021d; 2021k; 2021l). These sorts of personal reasons for changing schedules make visible that affective labor, and cultivate the cyber-social relationship between audience and streamer (Scheibe et al. 2022). Piker's audience frequently reacts supportively to him taking time off for his

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[18] Livestreaming is notably personal and intimate (Ruberg and Lark 2021; Taylor 2018), so it only makes sense that if "the personal is political" (Hanisch 1969) holds true – the format which makes personal public would make most everything political.

[19] I am writing this in the middle of a major news event, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and as a result there is a larger audience for news than when there is not a major news event happening. This may be inflating political streamers' viewership metrics to some degree at the moment.

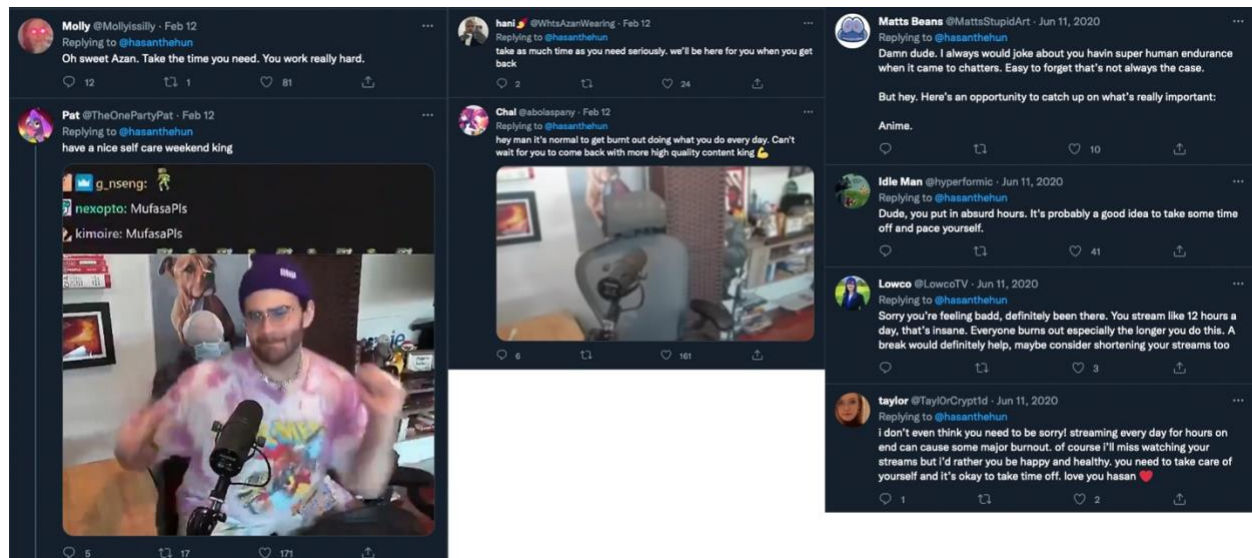psychological and personal needs, recognizing the labor that he puts in for their entertainment (Fig. 3).

Figure 3: Screenshots of Twitter responses to several announcements from Piker that he would be taking time off for his personal well-being. In these responses his fans wish him well in taking time off from streaming. Collected on Mar. 12th, 2022.

3.3 "Hi chat! hasL"

> Field notes, Dec. 12th, 2021: *As I log onto the stream, I am met with the loading screen for Hasan Piker's channel – two illustrated busts of his dog, Fish, blink out at me from in front of a gate above which a sign reads "opening soon." Immediately there are people in the live chat spamming encouraging emotes in anticipation of the stream properly starting. These are greetings for Hasan, and also for each other – not as specific individuals, but as other members of the collective. Punctuating the emotes are "hi everyone" and "good morning chat" messages flowing up the chatbox, as well as messages from the channel's auto-moderator gently chastising users for over-using emotes, and promoting the most recent episodes of Piker's podcasts. The swarming affect of the viewership feels warm, wrapping me in comradery – I am one of many young leftists playing in this space. I am not alone.*

I regularly join the stream from a push notification, which opens the Twitch app on my phone, or opens the site in my computer's browser. For most streams though, especially for larger creators on the platform, the beginning of the broadcast is not the beginning of the stream in earnest but rather a waiting screen. Piker's is as described in my notes above, and is accompanied by calm music, usually what has become known as "lo-fi beats."

An interesting cultural practice takes place in this time too, which rather than being a quiet waiting room patiently waiting for the main attraction to begin, it is highly interactive. Chat members anticipate the stream's coming events and greet the rest of the collective chat, as each individual person refers to the rest of the participating audience as "chat." Using the framework of Paddy Scannell's directional structures (2014, 29-33) of media, the sort of non-individual greeting to the collective pseudonymous, impersonal group framed as personal might be described as a "for-anyone-as-anyone." The chat and its constituents, when talking to each other as a collective act as proxies for one another – anonymous nodes of a collective intelligence (Lévy 1997, 13-15), expressing individual affect to and as a part of a collective. In Piker's stream, at its beginning, this expresses itself as the spam of his custom 'hasL' emote (Fig. 4). The use of this emote peaks at the start and end of every stream, almost without fail. This spam is a sort of ritual, creating a warm space, welcoming the community to another day and thanking Piker for his labor.
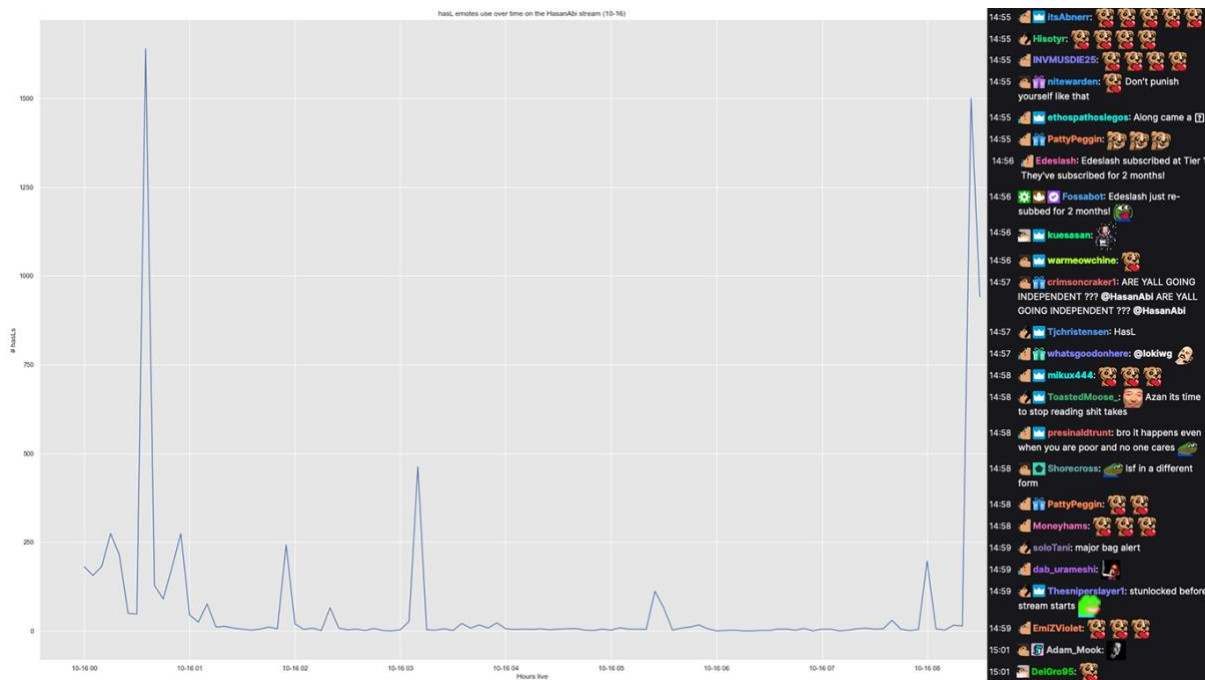

Figure 4: On the left, a graph showing the frequency of use of the emote 'hasL' over time from a representative stream. On the right, an example of 'hasL' emote spam, from Hasan Piker's Feb. 11th, 2022 stream. Screenshot from the hasanabi Twitch VOD. Collected Mar. 12th, 2022. https://www.twitch.tv/videos/1292607366.

The waiting screen ends with a song titled "Waiting for Hasan" (LilyPichu 2021) made by fellow streamer 'LilyPichu,' and Piker switches to the intimate face-cam only view, hyping himself and his viewers up as they continue to emote through 'hasL' and similarly excited feeling emotes. He then welcomes his viewers with some version of this spiel:

"What's goin' on everybody? I hope everyone's having a fantastic evening, a fantastic afternoon, a fantastic pre-afternoon no matter where you are in the world. I'm Hasan Piker and this is the *Hasanabi Broadcast* coming to you live from sunny,

beautiful California – Los Angeles, folks. We are live and alive, and I hope all the boys, the girls, and the NBs are having a fantastic one."

(Piker 2022d)

This is perhaps the most front-stage performance of the stream, to use Goffman's dramaturgical terminology (1990, 79), actively drawing from the elevated presentation vernacular of talk radio. Rather than setting a tone of talking at the audience for the rest of the stream, however, this kind of introduction feels more like a formality – getting the business of acting as though it were to a large audience out of the way.

Immediately following this section, the stream turns to Piker's personal life turning the front area of his stage into a backstage, and maintaining that tone for nearly all subsequent parts of the broadcast. He moves from a less-personal "for-anyone" tone, to a mode of address Scannell describes as "for-anyone-as-someone" – directed at a large audience, but addressed as to make each constituent member feel as though it is for them (2014, 29-32). He combines this style with intimate content, at this moment, speaking on his relationships, his health routine, his family, etc., all things which viewers are less privy to seeing develop on-stream. This sharing of intimate detail brings the audience closer to the streamer, furthering their knowledge of their personal lives, at least to the extent that they want to share.

Following this session of sharing personal updates, Piker "blasts off" and sends out a tweet and Instagram story post to his large social media following saying that he's live. These messages usually contain the phrase "daycare is open," a joke within the community that Piker "babysits" his audience (Pixietao 2021a; Pixietao 2021b; what-a-pleasure 2021); a meme or piece of art created by a member of his subreddit community "/r/okbuddyhasan"; and what topics or content he plans to cover on-stream that day.

3.4 Streaming the news

The main attraction to Piker's stream is his daily coverage of the news. What he made a name for himself doing at his previous job for *The Young Turks*, political coverage is what he has become most notable for on Twitch. Unlike legacy broadcast news, Piker navigates the media landscape in a similar way to how his audience might were they to do so independently (Grayson 2022b; Jackson 2020; Lorenz 2020). He shares his desktop screen to the stream, moving through browser tabs, remediating other media artifacts alongside his own analysis: Twitter posts, television clips, news outlet articles, YouTube videos. The everydayness and familiarity of this content style is what makes it attractive, not only sharing something that viewers might perceive as backstage and personal, his computer desktop, in the already intimate setting of his home (Ruberg and Lark 2021), but also mimicking the common use of the internet so that the audience can follow along and relate to what is happening on stream. Rather than feeling at a distance to the news, Piker's analysis of other outlets' coverage creates a feeling of relationship: watching his stream feels like being in the room with a knowledgeable friend, consuming the news together.

Piker's personality as a person is not the only draw to news coverage on his channel though, the participatory audience of the chat is also a central part of the experience, performing a number of tasks alongside Piker. As mentioned in the prior chapter, when

Piker needs assistance in sourcing a claim, or simply wants to find something online, he might ask the chat to find a link: *does anybody have the link to [x]?* This sort of crowd-finding relies on the collective, distributed intelligence of the chat where "no one knows everything, [and] everyone knows something" (Lévy 1997, 13-14). Expand this mediated brain to a live audience of several tens-of-thousands of people, and frequently the link in question is found quickly. This kind of sourcing is also transformed by the gaming logics inherent on Twitch, it becomes an attention game of "ludic spectatorship" (Boluk and LeMieux 2017, 65) in which audience members vie for the social capital associated with having one's message read on screen.

This sort of also attention game also expresses itself with critique of Piker's opinions or analysis, in which critical audience members or outside interlopers try to write the most inflammatory criticisms possible in order to get themselves banned or fluster Piker. This, of course, has led to an ambivalent community metagame of "jebaiting," or insincerely writing inflammatory messages in the hopes of getting Piker to read their chat log and see a different 'gotcha' message. While ancillary to the content itself, these sorts of practices make the news feel more conversational and approachable to the audience, and can help to break the flow of the stream into more manageable chunks.

The chat itself, through its constituents' participation, shapes the content of the stream as well. The emote spam demonstrated with 'hasL' earlier, is common throughout the stream using other emotes. This visual display of audience affect (Stark and Crawford 2015) provides the streamer with instantaneous feedback about how the content or their performance is going over with the audience, as well as providing the audience with an idea of how others watching feel. This intra-audience dynamic, in which some members' response triggers the same response in others, turns the chat's collective intelligence into a collective affect, or an affective swarm. I distinguish "intelligence" from "swarm" here, in that members of the swarm are constantly renegotiating their relationship to each other, as well as to their stimuli (Beni and Wang 1993; Rosenberg 2015; Wang and Li 2020). While this is not the first time that immediate feedback to a broadcast has been measured, even specifically about politics ("Pulse of the Nation: A Virtual Event" 2020), it is integrated into the livestreaming medium and is distributed over much larger number of participants – making its scale and mode novel. Comparing the use of emotes like 'PepeLa' and 'OMEGALUL'/'KEKW,' we can see that 'PepeLa' and the other two are used for different but overlapping purposes, whereas 'OMEGALUL' and 'KEKW' share a similar meaning and use (Fig. 5). These sorts of emotive gradients show how the audience's response to the content changes over time, and how the initial response can guide the streamer's own response.
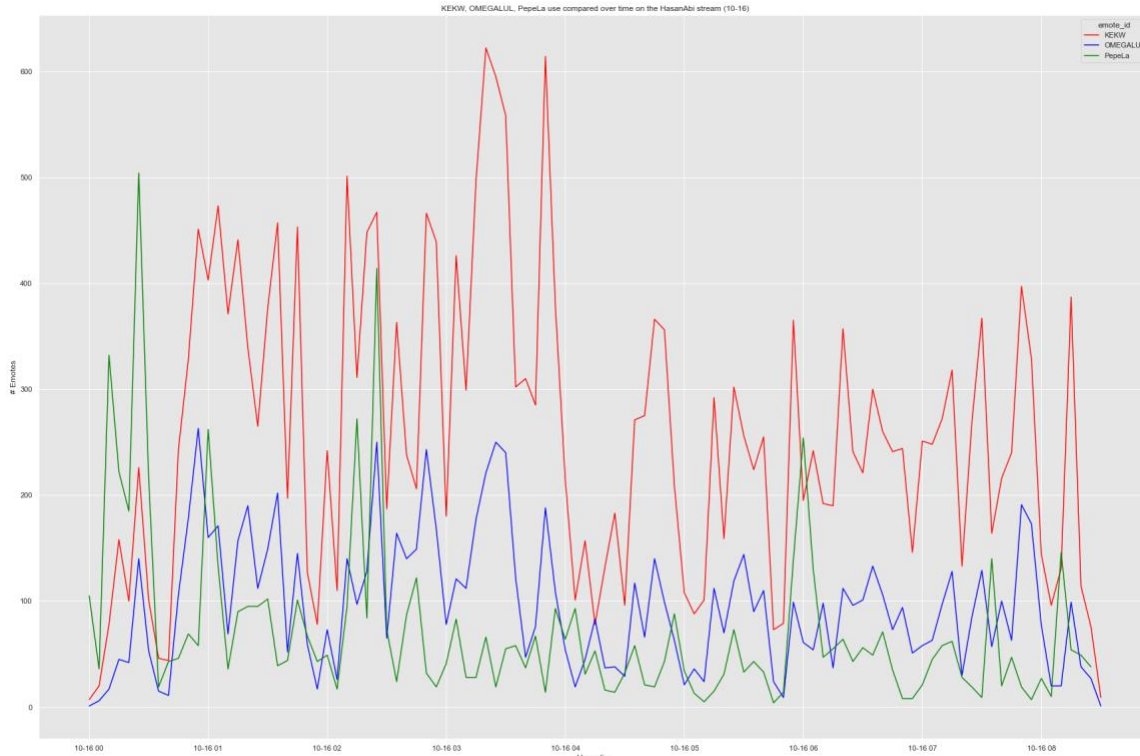
Figure 5: A frequency-over-time graphical comparison of 'KEKW,' 'OMEGALUL,' and 'PepeLa' emote spams from Hasan Piker's October 16th, 2021 stream.

This sort of affective swarming is not always in response to content itself, and can be used by streamers explicitly. In the Nicki Minaj incident, for example, Piker invoked the chat to proofread his tweets to the rapper – asking their opinion of whether or not they were acceptable, or if they were worth posting (Ostonox 2021c). When watching these sorts of interactions play out, different kinds of viewers are visible: those who are invested in the entertainment value of the stream might push for riskier wording via 'KEKW' or 'OMEGALUL' as a forms of ambivalent, fetishistic play (Phillips and Milner 2017, 99); on the other hand, fans invested in the personality of "Hasan Piker," and more worried for his reputation might coyly warn about future consequences of his words with 'PepeLa.'

Either way, having an active community to which they are beholden for income, influence, and content makes streamers somewhat accountable to their own audiences. Piker, who as a political commentator treads on thinner ice than most streamers, finds himself regularly apologizing for the effects of on-stream gaffes to his audience somewhat regularly. In the case of the Nicki Minaj incident, he apologized specifically to his Black followers if he made *them* feel uncomfortable with his comments, despite his expectation that they would understand his intention and the context. He specifically did *not* apologize to Nicki Minaj 'stans' on Twitter who he said willfully misrepresented his words in order to cape for the object of their fandom (Piker 2021h). This sort of insular cyber-social relationship between streamers and their audiences is the result of the power dynamic between streamers and viewers. In this arrangement, viewers rely on one person for their political analysis, education, and entertainment and then are more likely to view the streamer as correct in any given situation. While I may think that Piker

is correct in this situation, as in most, and that his chat in-particular takes a critical eye to his words – it is easy to see how this dynamic might be manipulated. Fellow streamer Vaush, for example, regularly takes neoliberal stances which uphold colonialist, global-capitalist, and/or reactionary paradigms and is able to persuade his audience by exerting his power as the arbiter of the stream (Samsen 2022; O'Quinn 2022; Ishkah 2021).

3.5 Reaction andies

As should be clear by now, 'reaction' content is a major part of streaming culture currently. While Piker's covering of political content might be classified as 'reaction,' he himself distinguishes between 'news' and 'reacts' in his content. Typically, once he has covered the news of the day, he continues on to this genre of content: pulling from YouTube playlists constructed by community members, videos from other content creators he follows, and even TV shows which are unlikely to be 'DMCA'd' – taken down under the Digital Millennium Copyright Act.

    "Reaction videos" are a longstanding genre of YouTube video which involve a content creator, predictably, reacting to some other internet, usually video, content; re-mediating it with visual affect and/or commentary (S. Anderson 2011; Werner 2012; Kim 2016). Building from the YouTube creators before them, Twitch's variety streamers have developed their own style of reaction content in which they react along with their audience to all kinds of different media. The surge in popularity of this style of stream, which comprises much of Twitch's 'Just Chatting' category and, as such, has risen in popularity along with it (Gwilliam 2021a; Kastrenakes 2020a), has been dubbed the "react[ion] meta[game]" (Wells 2022; Polhamus 2022; Grayson 2022a). While somewhat controversial, especially among games streamers who see it as moving in on their audience, this meta sees audiences engaging in a sort of group-watch in a similar capacity to how the previous section described how they participated in political content.

    The "reaction andy" or "reactfrog" audience for this kind of content also plays into the chat's attention metagame, with many individuals submitting links in the chat for content that they want the streamer to react to. Users who are good at curating content for the streamer may be given elevated status within the community, often receiving 'VIP' status which makes them "immune to chat moderation" ("Twitch Chat Badges Guide" n.d.). When streamers watch TV shows, or react to specific genres of content for extended periods of time, these are often described by their communities as "arcs," as though they were segments of a TV show themselves. For example, the period during which Piker watched mostly true crime videos on YouTube is referred to as his "true crim arc" (MikeJ91 2022).

    While similar types of reaction content proliferate across the platform, audience members tend to settle on one streamer to watch that content, valuing whatever individual personality they bring along with them. Audiences look for predictable, reliable responses in their streamers of choice, with those responses becoming jokes within the community. Piker has been given the nickname "Pausan" within his fan community, for example, because of the long periods for which he pauses videos to rant about their contents. This particular characteristic was made particularly obvious when popular YouTuber 'Causally Explained,' knowing that Piker would likely watch his video,

predicted correctly that he would pause it at a specific moment, and worked into his script a joke about Piker having paused the video (Horetski 2021). This predictability speaks again to the premium placed on reliability by audiences though, that audiences find comfort in both the authenticity and spontaneity of liveness as long as it remains somewhat predictable (Scannell 2014).

Piker's incorporation of Marxist political analysis and terminology into his reaction content is also a draw to his stream. He regularly reacts to political and adjacent content: talking about racial justice while watching the blackface reality TV show *Black. White.* (Cutler 2006); reactionary politics while watching right wing influencers Ben Shapiro, Joe Rogan, or Steven Crowder; or issues of gender and sexuality while watching Jubilee[20] debate videos. Piker regularly talks about how these videos contain political messages despite not always taking sides explicitly, operating as cultural propaganda for neoliberal or conservative actors, working to maintain the status quo (Althusser 1970).

3.6 Gaming frogs rise up!

As alluded to in discussion of the reaction meta, Piker and other variety and reaction streamers sideline video game streams in favor of other content which engages their audience more. Piker plays video games somewhat regularly, but relegates them to the ends of his stream – seeing a large decline in viewership when he begins playing ("HasanAbi - Streams List and Statistics" 2022). "Gaming frogs," viewers who enjoy his video gameplay content, often voice that they feel underrepresented in the content that he streams (Wandiclaos 2021a; 2021b; helenkellerseyesonly 2021a; 2021b). The marginalizing of gaming content on his stream too is subsumed by political humor, in which community members frequently poke fun at those, themselves often included, hoping for gaming streams. This push for one's preferred content in the stream is yet another expression of the attention metagame played by chat participants, advocating for their wants to be met in either the stream's chat itself, or in other forums related to the stream online.

Like with reactions, audiences generally follow reaction streamers for their personalities when playing games rather than their skill. A more unique quality of Piker's is his ability to weave political discourse into his gaming content, frequently quipping jokes about in-game events and actions which require prior knowledge of political theory or media. In early 2021, for example, he participated in a *Rust* roleplay server with other popular streamers in which he played the character "Hank Pecker," a caricature of American conservative Trumpist-libertarianism that relied heavily on leftist in-jokes, but also served as an educational tool to describe the contradictory politics and moral bankruptcy of the ideology ascribed to the character.

Gaming may also be used for explicitly political purposes, in particular to raise money and awareness for leftist causes or charity. One of the more notable instances of this took place over the course of 57 hours in 2019, as BreadTube content creator Harry

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[20] Jubilee is a popular YouTube channel which posts "clickbait" videos – those intended to attract attention through inflammatory topics, titles, and thumbnails – in which two sides of an issue debate topics, a group of people try to guess a fake within the group, etc.

'HBomberGuy' Brewis streamed *Donkey Kong 64* to raise money for the English transgender support organization Mermaids, ultimately raising over $340,000 (Hawking 2019). This stream set the precedent for these kinds of fundraisers, with many influential figures including Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, popular BreadTuber 'ContraPoints,' and military intelligence whistleblower Chelsea Manning joining at different points to express their support (Hawking 2019). *Chapo Trap House* host Felix Biderman hosted a similarly successful Twitch stream in May 2021, raising over $100,000 for the Palestinian relief organization Eye on Palestine during a violent flare up of Israeli aggression (Menaker 2021). Even as I write this, Piker is raising money for Ukrainian Relief Funds to support people in the country as Russia invades – raising over $100,000 within 19 minutes of starting (ostonox 2022), and as of writing has raised over $250,000 (PIker 2022b).

3.7 Chatter generated content

The effects of this kind of backhanded political education which permeates the culture of his stream can be found in the content generated by his audience, primarily centered around the subreddit "/r/okbuddyhasan." Showcasing community creations from this forum also features as a reoccurring weekly segment on the broadcast, its contributors dubbed "okbuddy frogs" (Galvater 2021; Charliethwitch 2021; thelospike 2021; GwithHeadphones 2021). The recognition given to artists and meme-ers from the audience creates a camaraderie within the audience, with Piker and audience members regularly expressing appreciation for the labor that goes into making both high and low effort participatory content. As described in prior chapters, the para-stream communities operate as participatory cultures in which there is a low bar to participation and the creation of related media artifacts (Jenkins 2009, xi). The regular showcase of this work also serves to further and continue the culture of Piker's community, passing down and creating new in-jokes.

 The labor of "okbuddy frogs," while voluntary, as described in chapter two is also not directly compensated. Artifacts created by the community are frequently used to promote the stream, and other elements are used within the stream itself. However, despite the tongue-in-cheek movement to "unionize chat" and calls for an "okbuddy strike" (AccomplishedMarch867 2021; FredDupe 2021) creators are happy to keep generating content for little more than recognition and praise. As with reaction content which creators are frequently happy to see streamed, the recognition of fan-labor to streamers' large, active audiences can drive traffic to their projects and raise their stature in the community. Video editor 'Ostonox,' for example, gained a large following within Piker's audience for his high-quality, playfully antagonistic videos. These edits, after becoming favorites on Piker's own stream, landed the editor official editing jobs for Piker, as well as for other major livestreamers such as Ludwig Ahgren (Ludwig 2021) and 'QTCinderella' (QTCinderella 2022).

 Piker's laissez-faire attitude towards his content rights, stemming from his political beliefs on copyright, encourages the creation of fan content and fan involvement. A development from this is what has become known within his following as the "Hasanabi clips-industrial complex" (HCIC) (Ostonox 2021a; 2021b). The HCIC is a loose grouping of YouTube channels which edit clips together from Piker's long livestreams into more

manageable single-topic videos, and upload them to YouTube. Despite Piker having his own official 'HasanAbi' channel, many of these fan channel still net hundreds of thousands of views per video. Piker encourages the growth of these channels, regularly promoting them on his stream and clearly encouraging his audience to use his content should they so choose. Allowing fans to monetize their fan-works remains uncommon across intellectual property owners, and represents a potential way for some compensation of the fan labor which often results in free publicity for its subjects.

3.8 Special guests

The largest disruptor of regular stream-programming is the appearance of a guest on the broadcast; however, as discussed previously with respect to Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez' *Among Us* appearance on Piker's stream, guests also work to expand streamers' reach. In the case of leftist streamers though, this works in two dimensions: either to expand the audience of the stream, and to expand the reach of leftist ideology to other audiences. The extent to which either of these dimensions expands depends on the guest appearing on the broadcast
     Piker's status as a high-profile Twitch streamer has first and foremost given him access to other popular streamers and events. He can regularly be seen collaborating with big names like 'Pokimane'; 'AustinShow'; 'Amouranth'; and Twitch's most popular streamer 'xQc' (Miceli 2021). These kinds of connections across livestreaming space allow for Piker to bring his holistic political analysis to others' audiences, exposing them to the much-maligned 'socialism' without antagonistic pretext. This cross-streamer collaboration, and the visibility of left-wing politics on the platform as a whole, has created an environment on Twitch which is amenable to leftist ideas and has created opportunities to expose audiences to interesting discussions.
     One notable, if bizarre, instance of this came when xQc was visiting Piker's house in October 2021 on a day when he was slated to interview *Jacobin* labor journalist Alex Press on-stream about ongoing film industry labor organizing in the United States (Press 2021). xQc, who is less knowledgeable about politics, had the opportunity to ask questions of Press and Piker in an explicitly political context (Piker 2021j). He was also able to share his own experiences with unions, talking about the uncertainty around unionization in the competitive *Overwatch* e-sports league (Irwin 2021; Piker 2021j).
     Piker's conversations with other Twitch celebrities need not be initially topically political to become political though, just as he weaves political messaging into his regular reaction and gaming content, he does so in casual conversation or collaboration. For instance, in January 2022 he shared a broadcast with popular hot tub streamer Amouranth, in which they went through appeals from users to be un-banned from her channel. For the hour long stream the two primarily discussed everyday feminism and misogyny, incels, and other issues as they encountered them in the appeals. They also compared their users frequently to see if there was crossover between them, largely finding that there was not (Piker and Amouranth 2022). This sort of crossover between very disparate audiences, hot tub stream viewers and political stream viewers exposes the prior to political messaging which they might not otherwise hear, inviting them to engage with the content in a low-stakes environment.

Guests on streams are not limited to other Twitch streamers either, Piker frequently has on other social media personalities, like the hosts of *Chapo Trap House* (Piker 2020d); journalists, like Press; artists, like popular rapper JPEGMAFIA (PIker 2021b); and even politicians themselves, like Ocasio-Cortez and Omar. These kinds of external collaborations bring new viewers to streamers' audiences, raising their profile in culture more widely, and legitimating their influence. All guest appearances though have the effect of networking leftist ideas across different audiences, exposing viewers to critical concepts, and normalizing discussion of left-wing concerns.

3.9 Everydayness in the stream

> Field notes, Dec. 12th, 2021: *Hasan starts playing a clip and tells the chat that he has to pee "real quick" and will be right back. He gets up quickly and dashes off screen, clearly wanting to minimize the time he's off-stream. The part of the stream which usually displays him sitting in his chair at his desk is conspicuously empty, but the audience already knows what to do in his absence. Users start spamming tongue-in-cheek messages evoking a similar energy to that of a middle-school classroom when the teacher has their back turned. The chatbox fills up with message after message, playfully making fun of Piker's absence: "no streamer," "AZAN? PogO." There is even a custom emote 'hasChair' which users send of Piker's empty chair, named "Hermie" for the company Herman-Miller, which is used to jokingly indicate that Hermie has taken over the job of streaming. The response of the chat feels as predictable as the bodily function for which Piker needed to excuse himself.*

The underlying relatability of Twitch broadcasts stems from their amateur feel and everyday nature. In a single, uninterrupted stream over a long period of time it becomes hard to obscure the functions of everyday life which interrupt the flow of the stream. Bodily functions like needing to eat, drink, stand up, and use the restroom are all made visible where they are often obscured in more 'polished' media formats. These sorts of normally invisible, yet distinctly regular everyday tasks become ritualized in Twitch's voyeuristic format, with chat participants reveling in the unsupervised time of interruptions when Piker is away from his computer. The chat often will spam the custom emote 'hasChair,' to joke that the visual space occupied by Piker on the stream has been taken over by his chair, and thus that the chair is now the streamer. This sort of bodily infrastructure maintenance is required because of the endurance broadcasting for long-hours entails, but nevertheless has become a point of critique – with detractors frequently claiming that Piker takes too much time away from the stream, stranding his audience. Nevertheless, he takes relatively infrequent breaks when looking at the frequency of his chat's demarcating 'hasChair' use (Fig. 6). Beyond this, perhaps strangely, Piker's audience enjoys the time he is away. Like a teacher and their daycare class, the very metaphor Piker frequently invokes, this time is used in a similar fashion to "mods are asleep" behaviors on internet forums, to test the limits of what is and is not allowed without strict supervision.
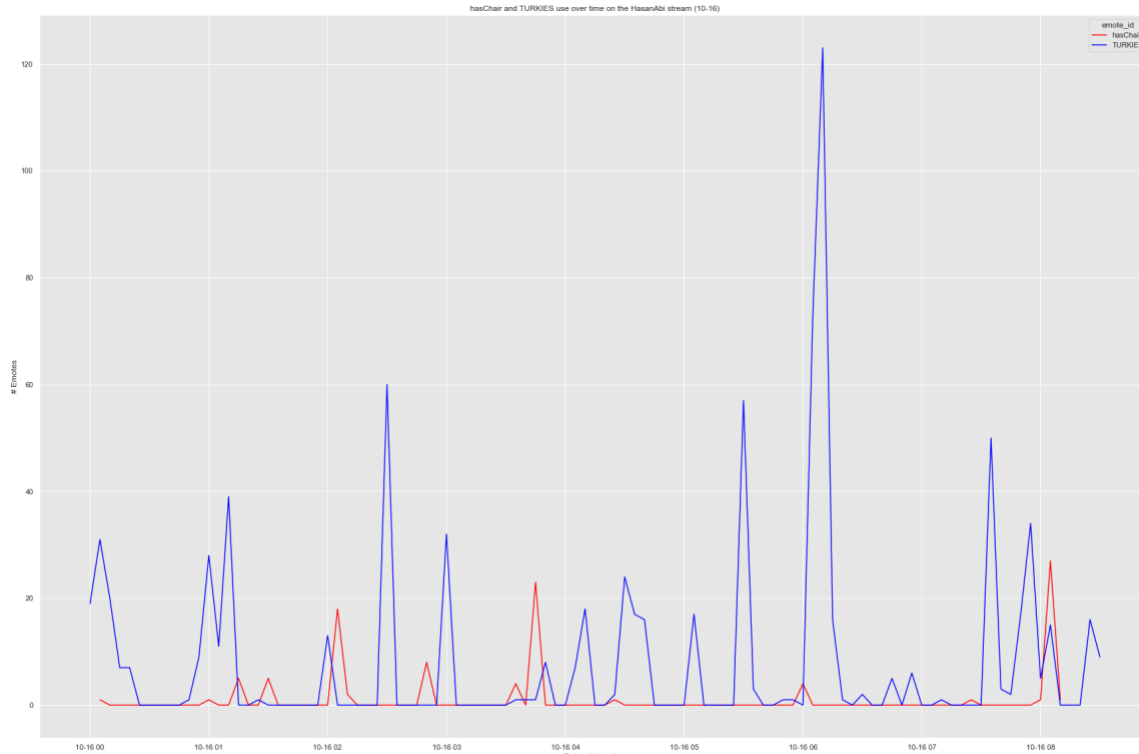
Figure 6: A frequency-over-time graph of 'hasChair' and 'TURKIES' emote use from Hasan Piker's October 16th, 2021 stream.

Similarly, because Piker lives with them, his mother and brother regularly appear, if only momentarily, on stream. These interruptions, while less regular, are also accompanied by ritualistic spam. When Piker's mother, whom his chat refers to with the Turkish word for mother *anne*, appears on-stream the chatbox is filled with cute, affectionate emotes, 'widepeepoHappy' and 'hasL' in particular (PIker 2022a). The audience seems to revel in, and vicariously enjoy, the caring domesticity which Piker's *anne* represents – as she usually is on-stream bringing him his "tendies," a joking term for any kind of food (Avyxyva 2020).

Even less relatable elements of the necessary, everyday stream aspects are ritualized, most notably his "top of the hour ad breaks" which the audience reminds him of in the chat if he seems like he might forget. This reminder is so frequent that he has the term 'ad' sent in his chat most frequently across the top 2,000 Twitch streamers (Piker 2020c) – despite running the contractual minimum of ads Twitch will allow (C. Bennett 2021). These reminders come in the form of viewers spamming the 'TURKIES' emote in the chat in celebratory fashion (Fig. 5), along with the phrases "top o' the hour" and "ad time."

The everyday domesticity that Piker, and other streamers, project in their streams in setting (Ruberg and Lark 2021) and in their routines endears their audience to them, furthering the cyber-social relationship between audience and streamer (Scheibe et al. 2022). The trust and community built through the presentation of unpolished everyday life on streams like Piker's harkens back to livestreaming's "lifecasting" roots (Ruberg and Lark 2021; Taylor 2018, 29-32), turning the banalities of everyday life into interactive content for a large audience.

3.10 "I enjoyed my stay hasL"

The stream ends like it begins in that the chat is flooded with 'hasL' emotes (Fig. 3), as Piker plays soft farewell music and thanks his audience for tuning in. A frequent message that viewers send is "I enjoyed my stay" – a reference to the feeling of place that is created by the stream's domestic and conversational elements. The platform of the stream restructures the boundaries of physical and social place such that "where [users] are no longer determines where and who [they] are socially" (Meyrowitz 1986). Piker's stream invites his followers to be guests who stay in his, well, *daycare* to play and learn something – be it about leftist material analysis, or themselves. At the end of the stream, or after a viewer leaves, they must return to their reality away from the safe "place" of camaraderie which Piker and his contemporaries construct in their streams. Informal polls of his audience suggest that his viewers skew younger, and un-/underemployed (Ansive 2021). They, like me, are the recipients of a society which seems hostile to the youth, bent on destroying our chance for a fulfilling life. Leftist streams serve to me, and likely to other viewers, as a place of respite: where our worries about the state of the world we have been left are real, and to say so and build community of it is not just allowed but encouraged.

3.11 Looking ahead

In this chapter, I have described the programming and affect of a representative political livestream using Hasan Piker's channel as a primary case study. I demonstrated how Piker weaves political messaging into a variety of content and networks those narratives across Twitch channels through interpersonal relationships with other streamers, all together building a space which is welcoming for young left-wingers who feel politically unrepresented in media. To follow in the conclusion to this thesis, I make a case for why leftist livestreaming is important, and what lessons the left can take away from Piker's successes to build a more equitable media ecosystem.

Conclusion: A manifesto for agitprop broadcasting

"The long, dark night at the end of history has to be grasped as an enormous opportunity. The very oppressive pervasiveness of capitalist realism means that even glimmers of alternative political and economic possibilities can have a disproportionately great effect. The tiniest event can tear a hole in the grey curtain of reaction which has marked the horizons of possibility under capitalist realism. From a situation in which nothing can happen, suddenly everything is possible again."

(M. Fisher 2009, 81)

4.1 Dreaming of a better world, together

In 2020, I was introduced to cultural theorist Mark Fisher's seminal work *Capitalist Realism* and it resonated with me in a way that few texts had. The idea that "it's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism" (M. Fisher 2009, 1), that as a society we had lost the ability to dream of a better future *for* people, a really better future, haunted me. Figuring capitalism as a sort of mental state in which people suffering under it reify their own subjugation through recognizing their plight (16), made sense. It at once made me feel a little less crazy, and proved its own point. All the media I consumed was leftist, yes, and those projects themselves were doing well – but it was isolating. I saw the people I was around, and while we all worked towards our futures, most everything felt futile.

Set against the backdrop of the world's governments' ineffective and callous response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Black Lives Matter protests of that summer felt similarly empty. Hollow victories against the repressive state apparatus rung out as statues came down, just as its militarized elements and ideological counterpart ramped up functions to quell the uprising (Althusser 1970). Police budgets ballooned (Goodman 2021), and the movement's rallying cry was coopted by neoliberal capital searching for diamonds in the blood. Politics increasingly felt hopeless, to me and to those around me. Beyond all this, the Trump era had partisanized political media beyond even the imagination of the Obama years: not only had the conservatives become completely incomprehensible, but liberal media too had become, oxymoronically, *radically liberal*. Obviously unable to stomach the media of the reactionary right or feckless neoliberal media conglomerates, all I had to comfort me was the cynical left-wing independent contingent of overly online media producers which had come to be known as the "dirtbag left" (Tolentino 2016; Boxer 2019; C. Brown 2020; Bowles 2020): *Chapo Trap House*, *TrueAnon*, *Trillbilly Worker's Party*, and others. Steeped in the gloom of the realities of Trump's administration and the mass death it incurred, and critical of the far-flung liberal fantasies of Joe Biden's then-campaign it felt like there was no escape.

Around the election itself, however, my outlook started to change. On Twitter, I, like many others, came across Hasan Piker's stream with Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and was shocked by the reach it received. I began to follow the election through Piker's desktop – and it felt markedly different. Rather than laughing ruefully alone to late capitalism's absurd realities read aloud by jaded podcast hosts, I did so alongside tens of thousands of comrades, many of whom were just learning about Marxism, and leftism broadly. Rather than feeling isolated, I felt a part of a community. Fisher describes

capitalist realism as a "pervasive atmosphere, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action" (2009, 16), but in the mediated place of Piker's stream the atmosphere was one of righteous indignation, and often of joy! The audience was learning in real-time to critically examine the politics and media they were consuming, ready to act.

Even though the future still seemed bleak, I began to once again believe that maybe some better future was possible. Piker's channel, albeit through mediation, makes visible a part of the invisible mass of people who want a change, who dream of a better world – and that gives me hope.

4.2 Communist news network?

So much of the issue with today's left appears in a semantic sense: it is hard to define what the left is. So far right has the Overton window shifted, that conservatives can call liberals "leftists" and most people seem to believe it, employing haphazard social epistemology (Godler, Reich, and Miller 2020) – be they liberals thinking highly of themselves, or conservatives speaking daggers at them. Nevertheless, "if our era is dominated by one hegemonic ideology, it is that of neoliberalism" (Srnicek and Williams 2016, 52), and from a left vantage that now consumes most popular ideologies between socialism and fascism, consolidated by capitalist commodification into convenient packages of policy which stagnate progress. People experience this consolidation of message through legacy and social media, each constituent member of which aims to differentiate itself from another by *claiming* to be different from the next, not necessarily by advocating for any improvements beyond the status quo. While Fox News may explicitly prop up dangerous reactionary rhetoric, so too do the "liberal media" alternatives such as the "Communist News Network" (L. Brown 2021) as the right would have us call it. This is of course a contradiction on multiple levels. First, liberal media, by definition, cannot be simultaneously communist. Second, there is relatively little difference in the real-world policies these media outlets suggest: more warmongering, higher police budgets, fewer social services. In Malcolm X's words, "the white liberal differs from the white conservative only in one way: the liberal is more deceitful than the conservative" (X 1963).

Communist philosopher Slavoj Žižek diagnoses the problem of defining "the left" as a sheepishness imposed by global capitalism, and that to begin our escape from neoliberalism the left "need not shamefully cover up its core with some cultural fig leaf" (2020, 6). While his solution is the term "communism," "socialism" seems just as useful today, if not more, as it already widely in use. Further than Žižek's philosophical prescription though, "the left" cannot act on its own in late capitalism – to make its mark, it must reach the public and connect to it. In other words it must cultivate a media ecosystem which is hospitable to socialism, not one which shies away from Marxism in any context, let alone the more action-oriented decolonization and liberation philosophies.

This need for a successful socialist media sphere is for the first time since the mid-1900's beginning to be met. Loose networks of transmedia influence are forming between Piker's small cohort of streamers; longstanding podcasters à la *Chapo*; leftist

outlets like *Jacobin* and *Current Affairs*; and stalwarts like Noam Chomsky and Žižek – and they are both collectively and individually more popular than ever. The convergence culture, in which Henry Jenkins predicted "people [would] take media into their own hands" beyond just commercially produced messages (2006, 17) would seem to be coming to pass. Indeed, I believe that when people post their lives online, the contradictions inherent in capitalism are posted along with them.

Where humor undergirds most successful leftist content, it strikes me that it is not necessarily its creators who are particularly funny, but rather the circumstances which they describe. When Piker or other members of the left's new media contingent point out the absurdity of even the most normal liberal or conservative policy position or press release, they are most often not making a joke. Rather, they are recontextualizing our reality out of stifling capitalist realism and into something else, a constructed alternative based in materialist analysis. These sorts of alternatives are the things that corporate media outlets cannot entertain, because they rely on the logic of capitalism and its profits rather than in any serious ethical framework.

The internet's facilitation of media creation and distribution beyond corporate media control has shifted the landscape. With access to the internet it is free to make and distribute media: no more copier fees for radical zines. And, while Obama placated much of the American left through performative action in his first term, successfully relegating the Occupy Wall Street movement into history's footnotes, the total inefficacy of his second and then the Trump presidency have underscored to the world that there is a fundamental problem with the American neoliberal hegemony. These factors along with the climate change and further wealth consolidation, the fruits of global capitalism, have led to the hinge point which now faces us. Figures like Piker, unafraid to declare themselves socialists are well poised to take advantage of these situations, exert pressure for change, and inspire others to do the same.

4.3 The revolution will not be livestreamed…

Despite the bluster, leftist livestreaming is not the panacea to the systemic problems of the world. Obviously. In fact, as discussed in chapter 2 with relation to livestreaming, there are distinct challenges to building a robust online leftist media ecosystem, not the least of which include the corporate control of platforms, the liberalizing effect of success, classic leftist purity testing, and the dangers of vertical power structures.

The most obvious barrier standing in the way of a leftist media ecosystem's longevity is the media power of corporations who control the modes of distribution: platforms and infrastructures (Lorde 2007). Although their project is predicated on systematic violence and therefore not comparable to the left's, the reactionary right has already seriously tangled with corporate media power (Hardy 2014, 198). Sites like 8chan which breed right wing violence struggle to find web hosting (Robertson 2019), social networking sites purge right wing conspiracists (Burns 2021), and even then-president Donald Trump was removed from SNSs for spreading lies and inciting violence (Alba, Koeze, and Silver 2021). It benefits media corporations to moderate any deviance within their power which threatens stability, and while right wing radicalism threatens social stability and lives, left wing radicalism when made actionable threatens the ability for corporations to continue turning a profit on the backs of their customers. These threats,

while quite different in ideological grounding and method, are nevertheless both existential for capitalist organization. With events like CrackerGate too, we are reminded that platforms are willing to push back against even the most constructed of transgressions, and are not afraid to align tacitly themselves openly with far-right ideologies (Hissong 2021). By creating truly independent media (Hardy 2014, 203), which is both able to be distributed and engaged with *en masse* as well as immune from corporate media power, this kind of control can be subverted – but it is a difficult task to not just create an alternative media source, but to convince people to use it.

The second barrier seems the liberalizing effect that comes with success and age. As commentators continue along in their lives, they tend to liberalize – renouncing, or at least avoiding, the positions they took earlier in their career. While not leftists, *per se*, there are few examples more potent than those of Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart, who during the Bush administration were known for their lambasting of liberals and conservatives alike. Nevertheless, these critiques became more toothless as they aged or achieved higher-status roles in industry. This is not surprising, with more success comes more capital, and with more capital comes something more to lose.

On the other hand, there remains the issue of leftist infighting and purity testing. These prevent people who are maybe not corrupt, but may be less committed. Simultaneously the preoccupation with ideological purity can often recreate carceral logics which prevent potential comrades from rejoining communities. In the case of leftist media figures, success even without changing position can itself be seen as class traitorship. Again and again, figures like Piker and his network are disparaged for becoming "champagne socialists," or even just "grifters," despite their consistent analysis and viewpoints (Graziosi 2021; Isidro 2021; Dorman 2021).

Media's inherent vertical power structures too are a challenge to the longevity of independent success, especially in a space which values critical engagement. The shape of livestreaming, as top-down distribution in which the streamer alone controls the message, is prone to abuse. While Piker may have frequently used his bullhorn thus far to advocate for anti-imperialism, anti-capitalism, and marginalized voices – others are already pivoting to other targets. Vaush, who has shown up throughout this thesis, has regularly used his position to demonize decolonial advocates on his livestream (Samsen 2022), for example, and the self-proclaimed neoliberal streamer Destiny has made it a goal to harass anyone to his left. These sorts of reactionary tendencies are supported through the constant push for engagement, and the drama that ensues is itself a lucrative market.

4.4 …unless?

Despite its challenges though, livestreaming uniquely benefits the socialist position and leftist materialist analysis – it requires its practitioners to navigate liveness, in all its sincerity and intimacy. Necessarily, the arrangement and dominant culture of livestreaming hold streamers accountable to their audiences on some level, with direct methods of recourse or critique available when suspicion arises via the chat. This kind of pushback is common in political livestreams, with users asking questions in both good and bad faith, and getting responded to appropriately. The avenue for and frequentness of criticism means that there must be some explanation for anything that a

person says while live, which materialism grants: rooting itself firmly in the lived conditions of people, rather than in abstraction. Right wing and more esoteric ideologies are not equipped for liveness, because they simply cannot respond to the collective bullshit-calling of a live, co-constitutive audience. Capitalism and rightism cannot explain away the contradictions of their own relations sufficiently, because the "contradictions of material life" (Marx 1978, 5) under capitalism say otherwise. This, to me, explains why right-wing content flourished on YouTube and in other static, edited forms, but has yet to really make its way to livestreaming beyond the fringes: it cannot explain itself without debatespeak and editing. Meanwhile, livestreaming rewards the sincere, those who can take critique and either adapt their view or explain in sufficient terms its failing.

This all comes back to livestreaming's wider contribution, the incorporation of the audience into the content directly. This is where it differs, as discussed in chapter 1, from prior live formats: here the feedback is all visible and synchronous, it is fully incorporated. Criticism while live is visible, loud, and immediate. There is no meaningful video delay for self-censorship, there is no laugh track. The audience shapes the content through its contributions to the stream's content itself, but also in a political sense as a constituency which ensures sincerity. Piker's success can be attributed to many features, but above all he presents sincerely and is accountable to his audience as he streams. While this has its own issues, the collective intelligence of the live chat explored in chapter 3 is in many senses democratic and self-moderating: distributed across many, constantly enhancing, and coordinated in real-time (Lévy 1997, 13-15).

While this is surely a precarious arrangement, it is nevertheless been a successful one so far, continuing to grown beyond expectation. While it remains to be seen if Piker will remain popular – if more will join him in wide-spread success like that of BreadTube (Kuznetsov and Ismangil 2020), or if this kind of media will fizzle out or receive moderation from the platforms upon which it relies – his stream exists now as a cautiously bright future for socialist broadcasting. The audience for leftist partisan media is growing, with more young people more politically involved and more politically left (Parker, Graf, and Igielnik 2019). Unless there is some radical change in corporate political media's analysis, these young audiences will continue to move to online sources for their news and entertainment. This shift is an opportunity to take online media for the left, and to affect change with it – an opportunity which bodes well for the livestreaming left's possible futures.

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