

The Politically Polarizing Nature of Political Live-streaming

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March 25, 2024

Abstract

In an era where the intersection of politics and digital entertainment is increasingly prevalent, the advent of political live-streaming on platforms like Twitch has introduced a new dimension to political discourse, characterized by its unique potential to both engage younger audiences and exacerbate political polarization. This paper examines the inherently polarizing features of political live-streaming—specifically, the monologic style of streamers, the interactive yet echo chamber-prone nature of live chats, and the resultant feedback loop between streamers and viewers—that foster a pronounced polarizing effect on political discourse. By contrasting the dynamics of live-streamed content with traditional and other contemporary media forms using case study analysis, this paper highlights how political live-streaming fosters ideologically homogeneous communities more prone to political extremism compared to other media platforms. Despite recognizing some benefits of political live-streaming in educating youth, this paper concludes that such pluses are outweighed by its tendency to deepen political divides and perpetuate extreme ideologies at the expense of productive discourse.

1 Introduction

On the evening of October 20th, 2020, politicians Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Ilhan Omar, along with other famous streaming personalities, live-streamed themselves playing the then uber-popular game *Among Us* to hundreds of thousands of Twitch users. The live-stream, which amassed over 400,000 viewers at its peak viewership count, aimed to attract support for Joe Biden’s 2020 US Presidential Campaign [Lor20]. While this historical livestream was one of the most popular of its kind, it is by no means an isolated example of the recent trend toward the intersection of politics and casual live-streamed entertainment on platforms such as Twitch. The medium of live-streaming is becoming a hub

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for political discourse unique from its social media and traditional media counterparts. This paper will argue that the nature of political live-streams often causes political polarization, damaging the holistic quality of political discourse. I will examine three aspects that make live-streaming a distinctive polarizing channel for political discourse: the monologue nature of political live-streamers (in Section 3.1), the nature of the live chat function (in Section 3.2), and how the interaction of the two creates a feedback loop resulting in more political extremization (in Section 3.3). In Sections 4.1 and 4.2, I will then illuminate how live-streaming’s polarizing characteristics are more potent than other mediums for political discourse. Lastly, in Section 5, I will weigh the upsides of political live-streaming against its polarizing effects to conclusively prove its harmful qualities.

2 Conceptual Framework

To prove how political live-streaming and the format’s idiosyncratic characteristics have served as a medium for political polarization, this paper will focus on a few case studies of both political live-streamers and their alternative political media counterparts. The usage of this research methodology is primarily due to a lack of quantitative analysis in the literature on the effects of political live-streams. The four major case studies that this paper will refer to are: (i) Hasan Piker (who goes by the tag “HasanAbi” online), a liberal live streamer who has millions of followers across the live-streaming platform Twitch, as well as YouTube and Instagram; (ii) Nick Fuentes, a conservative live-streamer and outspoken racist who primarily streams on the live-streaming platform known as Kick; (iii) Adin Ross, another politically conservative Kick live-streamer who is often linked with the infamous conservative political personality Andrew Tate; and lastly (iv) Ben Shapiro, whose non-live-streamed content can be compared with live-streamed content to better understand its unique functions.

It is also important to define a few terms for the purpose of this paper. First, a “political live-streamer” is often a content creator who live-streams to an audience that actively gives them revenue via ads and subscriptions. Like some radio talk show hosts, live-streamers produce their content in a monologue style, with themselves talking directly to their audience. For example, political live-streamers will watch news clips, read news articles, or discuss the ideologies of pundits with their viewers, commentating on and reacting to what they see directly to their viewers. While it is impossible to characterize all political live-streamers under a blanket definition, they often stream for upwards of 6 hours at a time and emphasize viewer engagement through the live-chat function. While doing so, they impose their political ideologies in a disarmingly entertaining, often comedic way to their viewers. By accompanying political discussions with lighthearted commentary to keep their content interesting, the ultimate goal of the live-streamer is to promote what are often extreme political agendas.

Second, this paper will coin two terms to portray the unique aspects of political live-streams compared to non-live-streamed content. For this paper, popular

live platforms such as Twitch, Kick, and Cozy, among others, will be classified as “dynamic” platforms. These platforms are juxtaposed with more text-based, mostly non-live “static” social media platforms, including Twitter/X, Instagram, and Facebook.

Third, to properly understand this paper’s argument, one must have a clear understanding of what political polarization exactly means. Here, I will co-opt the definition of “social polarization” that Lilliana Mason puts forward in her book *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*. Social polarization, as Mason explains, is how members of opposing political groups (e.g., Republicans and Democrats) perceive each other in antagonistic ways, making politics more of a “win at all costs” battleground rather than a constructive space for agreement and compromise [Mas18]. It is important to note here that this paper will focus on the type of polarization that pertains to the emotional attachment that people tend to have to their political affiliation. This concept differs from the more common understanding of political polarization, which is the phenomenon of uneven statistical distribution of people’s views on certain controversial issues (such as abortion) where most people embrace extremist viewpoints on either side of the political spectrum. Nolan McCarty documents this common statistical approach in his foundational book, *Polarization: What Everyone Needs to Know* [McC19]. This paper, however, will focus on social polarization, which refers to the emotional attachment that people feel to their political party not only on a few contentious issues but more in the general sense of group membership and pride that one derives from being part of such a community. As Mason puts it, citizens emotionally attached to their political party or group alignment will act “just like sports fans attend a game and cheer” [Mas18]. I argue that the medium of political live-streaming drives this emotional attachment through the powerful echo chamber effect of its live chat functions and the intimate nature of political live-streaming communities.

3 The uniquely polarizing nature of political live-streams

3.1 Streamers

A prime example of the trend toward combining politics with entertainment-oriented live-streamers can be found in Hasan Piker, a tremendously popular online personality with hundreds of thousands of viewers. Piker has grown a following by propagating his liberal, democratic-socialist political philosophies [Lor20]. Note that political streamers often hold relatively extreme political positions to distinguish themselves and thus maintain relevance. However, political live-streamers often offer these radical political takes in a relatable, entertaining manner. The unedited, often humorous way that streamers monologue to their viewers for hours each session can make the viewers feel as though they are talking with a friend over coffee. This state lulls viewers into lowering their intellectual guard, where they become likely to buy into the loaded rhetoric

that these streamers use because they feel the streamer is relatable.

The loaded rhetoric and the humor of political streamers are often directly related. Piker often goes on long rants that comedically attack politically conservative pundits and citizens to degrade political outgroups, which makes the average viewer subconsciously feel strong negative emotions towards such political outgroups. In the case where the viewer’s first interaction with politics is through such a live-stream, as is often true for the large youth portion of the audience for such live-streaming platforms, the viewer is even more impressionable and thus further affected by this aspect [Sta22]. Not only does the lowering of one’s intellectual guard conduce a myopic view of politics through what the political streamer says, but because the viewer feels connected to the streamer, he/she is also more likely to feel emotional attachment and defend the streamer and the streamer’s ideologies.

3.2 Live chat

The live chat functionality on almost all contemporary streaming services provides real-time interactivity for viewers, creating a communal aspect where viewers can communicate with each other. This can lead to political echo chambers, a mechanism by which an existing political opinion within a group is reinforced due to selective exposure to information, thus polarizing the entire group. In fact, according to the Brookings Institute, citizens strongly tend to pursue agreeing political viewpoints, even if doing so is at the expense of the viewpoint’s credibility and factual accuracy [MOB21].

The group identity nature of the chats themselves creates uniquely ideologically isolated environments (i.e., echo chambers) where yes-sayers naturally overwhelm unknowledgeable or dissenting viewers. This phenomenon further entrenches an extremist political group, making the average viewer likely to become ideologically influenced and socially polarized. Echo chambers are an especially well-documented phenomenon on static text platforms like Twitter and Facebook that have dominated the Internet era. However, while echo chambers on static text platforms form primarily due to the nature of content recommendation algorithms, echo chambers form organically in live-streamed chats because there is very little to no check-and-balance system. While mainstream static platforms often have text-based comment sections that are recorded and regulated by content moderation software and moderators, dynamic platforms are harder to regulate insofar as they are live and not as accessibly recorded in the same way that a text comment would be. For example, on static text platforms like Instagram, comments can be viewed, reported, removed, and even fact-checked well after the original comment was uploaded or the host content was uploaded. However, real-time chat moderation is usually insufficient in a more dynamic environment like a live-streamed chat, particularly due to the overwhelming nature of extremist viewpoints, as mentioned earlier. Unlike static text platforms with a universal content moderation policy across each respective platform, dynamic platforms often leave the moderation of each live-stream’s chat within the purview of the streamer and the team of live chat modera-

tors they appoint [Twite]. As a result, when content moderation does happen, it is almost always enforced by moderators who are personally biased toward the personality running the stream. This exacerbates the partisan extremism that dominates live-streams, as moderators are quick to silence dissenting viewpoints by suspending or banning certain users from using the particular stream’s chat function. These suspensions are especially common on Twitch, on which they are referred to as “timeouts” and are issued by moderators. Moderators can issue these timeouts with essentially no legitimate reason beyond that the timed-out user was in any way negatively affecting the live-stream.

Additionally, the effects of echo chambers on dynamic platforms are saliently conducive to political polarization compared to those on static platforms. Static text algorithmic echo chambers involve algorithms feeding users posts from various sources that are all generally within the same political alignment. On the other hand, a live-streamed community involves audience members aggregating into one community revolving around the streamer and his or her political agenda, thus creating a stronger echo chamber built on an intimate sense of belonging to an online community. Thus, with echo chambers on dynamic platforms, the polarizing effects of echo chambers are even more conducive to political extremism insofar as each live-streamed community acts as an almost impenetrable ideological bubble filled exclusively with a select few extreme political ideologies.

The echo chamber phenomenon is also particularly spellbinding in the live chat setting, as thousands of concurrent viewers send hundreds of messages at any moment, overwhelming dissenters [VAKV21]. In a live-streamed chat imbued with a constant flow of messages, the sheer quantity of yes-sayers to what the political live-streamer espouses means that, even if a dissenting viewpoint is recognized, it is unlikely to change the dogmatic political views of the thousands of other viewers it challenges. In such a casual yet politically extreme community, the response of the said majority seldom includes constructive discourse to find an ideological middle ground but rather often includes such toxic remarks as labeling a dissenter with derogatory slang terms. For example, in Hasan Piker’s live chats, his viewers label those with conservative political views as “hogs” [Has23]. On the opposite side of the political spectrum, political conservatives such as Nick Fuentes viewers often derogatorily label political leftists as “libtards.” Due to this chat environment, viewers within such political live-stream communities often conform to the ideologies of the majority due to the fear of being publicly shamed by others. This inclination to fit in, particularly among the more impressionable younger audiences, results in the shaping of extreme political alignments.

3.3 The combination of streamers and live chats

The combination of the two aspects of live-streaming discussed above creates a feedback loop that further lulls the average viewer into a socially polarized state. A feedback loop refers to a phenomenon in which the outcomes of one event cause another event, subsequently forming a continuous loop where the

effects of the original event are amplified. In political live-streaming, the two polarizing aspects in the streamer and the live chat create a feedback loop whereby each entity polarizes the viewer by itself and accentuates the other’s polarizing features. In an abstract sense, when a political streamer polarizes their audience, that same audience is influenced to act in a polarized way in the live-stream’s chat, which in turn becomes a polarizing input for the streamer insofar as streamers often interact with their chat in the ways illustrated earlier. This is a feedback loop by definition.

For example, ultra-politically conservative personality Nick Fuentes often discusses his anti-Semitic views on live-stream [Hoc22]. The polarized nature of the live chat prevents any challenge to the views of Nick Fuentes, making it so that the average live viewer will be more likely to agree with Fuentes’ claims to conform with the rest of the stream’s community. Furthermore, the streamer, in this case, Fuentes, will engage with the chat by dispelling dissenters and actively encouraging the further extremization of his viewers by, say, platforming a certain viewer’s comment with which he agrees. This common phenomenon creates a feedback loop by which the political extremism of the streamer successfully encourages politically extreme behavior from viewers in the chat, which in turn inspires the further spread of extreme ideologies from the streamer—the cycle continues. Additionally, the extreme and unchecked characteristics of live-streamed politics discussed in the two previous sections exacerbate the effects of this feedback loop. For one, such a feedback loop can continuously occur without pundits to challenge Fuentes or his thousands of extremist viewers.

This phenomenon also occurs in ultra-politically liberal Hasan Piker’s live-streams, in which Piker will often make demeaning comments toward political conservatives that his viewers will add onto by further insulting political outgroups and their ideologies. This effectively gives Piker more material that he himself can respond to, where he often adds to the banter against outgroups posed by his viewers. In response to such political ideas, his viewers again respond with their own, often more extreme takes, thus creating a feedback loop.

4 How live-streaming differs from other political media platforms

4.1 Traditional alternatives

Compared to other traditional media formats that have served as platforms for political discourse, political live-streaming produces more social polarization by nature. To illustrate why this is the case, this section will cover the structure behind how the two types of media influence the political ideologies of its viewers. To achieve this comparison, this paper will compare different time periods and types of media personalities by briefly looking at Father Charles Coughlin, a famous figure in the religious broadcasting (later known as televangelism) movement in the 20th-century United States who propagated conservative Christian ideologies [Had93]. Similar to the current intersection of live-streaming with pol-

itics, religious broadcasters like Coughlin used relatable monologue-style content to draw in viewers and make them agree with the broadcasters' political ideas. Where modern streamers often use humor and comedically demean their opponents to connect with their audience emotionally, televangelists often envelop their messages in an air of Christian morality and righteousness to draw viewers to their views. However, the extent to which televangelists could spread such extreme ideologies was less than the extent to which political live-streamers can today, due to the structure behind both mediums. The level of backlash religious broadcasting personalities received for their extremist ideologies—as in television networks canceling their shows—was more effective in curbing such extremism compared to what live-streaming services can do today [Had93]. The network that hosted Coughlin's original Christian radio talk show, the Central Broadcasting Service (CBS), eventually split ways with Coughlin because controversial political figures like him posed a risk of alienating advertisers and stakeholders who did not want to associate the brand with divisive or extremist viewpoints. As a result, CBS had to consider its reputation and responsibilities to the audience worldwide and decided to discontinue such politically extreme broadcasts.

On the other hand, political live-streaming, juxtaposed with other traditional political media sources, has more potential to exacerbate polarization due to the absence of such corporate censorship and accountability. Streaming companies like Twitch seldom suspend or ban streamers for spreading politically extreme ideologies, as they are simply the host platform on which such streamers create content and thus are not directly tied to what ideologies the streamer advocates put forth. Streaming platforms thus rarely suspend creators unless they foster extreme behavior that violates community guidelines, such as incessantly using slurs. But even when live-streamers are suspended or banned for such actions, they can still easily jump from one streaming platform to another without facing serious repercussions, given the sheer quantity of live-streaming media companies and their generally lax policies. An example of this platform-jumping phenomenon lies in the live-streams of Adin Ross, a creator on the streaming platform Kick, who moved to the website after being banned on Twitch for spreading hate speech [Mic23]. Ross continues to disseminate transphobic, neo-Nazi, and anti-Semitic messages on his live-stream without being disciplined by the Kick platform [Hor23]. Compared to, say, a televangelist trying to sign a new deal after being cut, political streamers have a far lower bar for entry to continue spreading their extreme ideas, in contrast to traditional media personalities.

Additionally, the way the creator and the audience interact with one another in a live setting also makes political live-streaming a saliently polarizing content form. As opposed to other forms of traditional media mediums such as podcasts or television programs, the ability for the two parties to interact with one another in real time strengthens the emotional attachment that conduces social polarization per Mason's model. This is because audience members feel more included when creators or fellow audience members can directly and immediately address their ideas. The aspects of the live-streaming medium

mentioned above also make the creator appear more trustworthy even if they are not, since the creator can manipulate the extent to which dissenters can challenge his or her authority through moderating the dissenters’ presence in the chat, relying on the pile-on effect or even by just directly rebutting certain comments in a manner that would otherwise be impossible in a traditional media context. Even though some more traditional media formats have some ability for audience members to interact with the creator in real-time—for example, call-in radio/TV programs—the heightened extent to which this happens is far greater on live-streams, subsequently amplifying the effects of such interactions. This is true quantitatively, as political streamers can respond to far more chat messages from far more viewers than call-in show hosts can listen to the longer voice messages from viewers. But even setting aside such quantitative factors, the unique way in which viewers can directly interact with other viewers, regardless of the presence of the streamer themselves, forms another aspect of the socially polarizing communal aspect of political live-streams.

4.2 Contemporary alternatives

While political live-streams have many distinct features that hurt the quality of today’s political discourse, especially among the youth, it is important to qualify the extent to which the nascent medium has caused partisan social polarization. In the 21st century, political misinformation and partisan extremism have worsened as more information is disseminated online—particularly on social media [MCS21]. The politically polarizing effects of the Internet have been a topic of great academic interest preceding the 2016 US presidential elections, during which echo chambers formed in social media communities in which citizens were continuously exposed to extreme information to the point where they may believe it [LBS17]. The formation of echo chambers within political live-streaming communities and live chats resemble such echo chambers in other facets of social media, proving that the polarizing phenomenon is not entirely exclusive to live-streaming. The similarities between polarization on live-streaming and social media platforms also apply to how personalities spread their ideologies. Where Nick Fuentes and Hasan Piker use loaded language to deface the other partisan group, pundits like Ben Shapiro on Facebook use similar hostile tactics to rile up their audience and convince audience members to buy into their extreme ideologies [Par21]. These phenomena are not just limited to the Internet—traditional media sources like Fox News have also utilized extreme, sometimes discriminatory rhetoric to degenerate American liberals, causing some American conservatives to discredit any dissenting viewpoints as “propaganda” [Wag20].

Furthermore, the emotional and often entertaining appeal of political streamers discussed in Section 3.1 of this paper is not exclusive to live-streamers. Much of Ben Shapiro’s popularity stems from his refutation of liberal outlooks in a comedically cathartic viewing experience for his majority conservative audience. However, while the political ramifications of political live-streams are not entirely new, the medium still polarizes its audience in especially harmful ways.

To take into account one example that this paper previously briefly discussed, dynamic live-streamed platforms often allow content creators to ban or suspend viewers with dissenting viewpoints. Compare this with the more stringent moderation systems of static social media platforms like Twitter/X, Instagram, and Facebook—where even the likes of former U.S. President Donald Trump has been banned for alleged political misinformation—and the socially polarizing effects of political live streams become clear.

5 Why the benefits of political live-streaming do not outweigh its harms

Although there are numerous flaws with the nascent political live-streamed medium, it would be disingenuous for this paper to say that political live-streams are entirely flawed as a format. Many familiar with the nascent medium highlight its positive impact on politics, such as the New York Times article cited at the beginning of this paper, which emphasizes the positive aspects of political live-streaming [Lor20]. Many praise the entertaining and accessible way that political live-streaming personalities discuss complex issues as a gateway to the world of politics for many younger citizens. In the case of Hasan Piker, the streamer whom the New York Times article focused on, he admits that he purposefully uses a funny, sometimes demeaning style of political commentary to make politics “less boring” for teenagers and Millennials [Sun22]. In some ways, these aspects can be positive—watching a funny streamer talk about politics is likely to be far more immersive and informative for the average teenage or 20-year-old than cable news or a single Instagram post by Politico. However, the political engagement that such live-streams provide to younger people, for the reasons discussed throughout the paper, is ultimately not a net practical benefit insofar as such engagement leads to long-term political polarization and thus damages political discourse. The accessibility of political live-streaming is simultaneously a key characteristic and danger of the medium, acting as a gateway that politically radicalizes young people. Because the formation of such strong political convictions built within the often impenetrable walls of echo chambers are hard to revert, the holistic effects of the political live-streaming world are exacerbating today’s problem of bipartisan extremism and hateful political discourse by passing it on to the next generation.

6 Conclusion

In the end, this paper provides three distinct arguments to illuminate the extent to which the socially polarizing effects of political live-streaming harm political discourse. First, I explored the distinct qualities of live-streaming regarding how streamers format their content and the live chat feature exclusive to live-streams, and then explained the propensity for both aspects to socially polarize viewers. Within the argument, the paper then explained how the interaction

between these two features magnified the polarizing effect of the other in a feedback loop. Second, I argued that the live-streaming format is inherently unique in causing political extremism compared to other forms of political media, namely traditional media such as television and modern-day social media. Lastly, this paper provided a proviso to its overarching argument by conceding that political live-streams provide some benefits, such as by engaging younger generations in discourse, yet explained why the cons of the format outweigh its pros. Although the nascent medium of political live-streaming is still evolving, it damages political discourse by causing further social polarization, especially among younger generations who are meant to be the voice of the future. For now, the future looks divided along extreme political faction lines.

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