

Piracy & Media Studies

“Live Piracy”

Evan Elkins, *Colorado State University*

As I write this, the summer Olympics are taking place amid the usual complaints about the sorry state of NBC’s coverage. Just as they did in 2012 and 2014, frustrated viewers are trying to figure out how to skip the network’s tape-delayed coverage and actually watch the events live. One common approach is to use a virtual private network (VPN) to access the BBC or CBC’s livestreamed coverage, which is geoblocked in the United States. Whether we should call this piracy or not is debatable, though it’s certainly an informal use that violates a platform’s terms of service.

While we might not feel all that subversive (or guilty) when partaking in this kind of circumvention, there’s another burgeoning mode of unauthorized viewing that people use to access Olympic telecasts—one marked by the more clearly unlawful intellectual property distribution practices that we usually think of as piracy: illegal livestreams. Some have suggested that live programs—sports, usually—represent the final tether keeping TV viewers from cutting the cable cord. However, sites like First Row Sports, Stream2Watch, and others indicate that this may not be the case. These sites aggregate links to illegally streamed live events like sports and awards shows to users who can’t—or don’t want to—watch on television. Although we still often think of digital piracy in the context of file sharing and torrenting, improved broadband and media streaming technologies have recently given these livestreaming sites a broader user base. In addition, the livestreaming platform Periscope has been used to stream programs like *Game of Thrones* and events like the 2015 Floyd Mayweather, Jr. vs. Manny Pacquiao fight to viewers unwilling to pay for a cable subscription or pay-per-view fees.

For today’s discussion, I’ll propose a question: when piracy goes live, what can this reveal about how we define piracy, the phenomenology of pirate consumption, and the logistics of producing and distributing pirate media? That’s a big question, so for now I’ll point to a few ways livestreaming services complicate our understanding of piracy. For one, they allow us to better assess the temporality of informal media, which is usually conceptualized as another indicator of piracy’s fragmented nature. Whether we’re talking about illegally copied region-free DVDs sold at a sidewalk stand or a leaked album that hits torrent sites a week before its official release date, we often think of piracy as either lagging behind or pushing ahead of traditional distribution and consumption schedules. However, livestreaming shows that this is not always the case. If piracy’s supposed deviation from normative temporality has often been used as a way to pathologize pirate media practices and users as deviant, greedy, or individualistic, then a look at contemporary piracy’s dimensions of liveness and communal viewing forces us to further reassess dominant assumptions about pirate media use.

Looking at illegal livestreams can also help contextualize contemporary piracy within a deeper history of unauthorized media practices. Piracy’s liveness isn’t really anything new, and we should think about how livestreaming recalls earlier intrusions on the television industry’s careful management of spatial *and* temporal control. Whether based in producing or consuming pirate media (or somewhere in between), practices like pirate radio, analog television signal hijacking, and tapping cable lines were also based in logics of liveness and simultaneity. Because

piracy is often discussed in the context of contemporary, illegal digital commodity exchange, it has at once become disassociated with liveness and invoked as a symptom of individualized (or, less charitably, selfish) on-demand media culture. But this ignores established traditions of piracy as a live, collective experience.

Finally, livestreaming can help nuance our understanding of piracy's production and distribution cultures. In such a decentralized, informal media environment, it's worth asking questions about who's posting these streams and why. When watching illegal sporting event livestreams, you notice that some come from internal production or arena-camera feeds rather than television signals. It's hard to tell immediately whether these emanate from in-arena workers or users illegally sharing streams from formal livestream platforms. Either way, posting a working livestream, whether on a link aggregator or on Periscope, involves knowledge, work, and technological infrastructures that are often hidden. Researching the people and institutions that sustain pirate livestreaming can reveal how informal digital media industries and uses might be changing.