

Digital Production Cultures

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How can television and media industries scholars investigate the similarities and differences in all manner of screen content through production cultures? How can the study of digital production cultures influence audience studies, particularly for user-generated content? This roundtable seeks to discuss these questions and to explore the intricacies of digital production cultures in televisual and non-televisual media spaces.

When Amazon purchased the Twitch platform in 2014 it was investing in post-network live media making, not just a platform for videogame live streaming. Twitch operates on a series of principles that reflect a much wider set of changes in the way media is produced and consumed, punctuated by smaller audiences, higher levels of interactivity, and crucially a major swing in the commercial imperatives that sustain this kind of media. In this ecosystem the costs are carried more directly by individual producers and their audiences, while the platform generates revenue from a combination of advertising, portions of subscriptions and donations that pass through Twitch, and from coordination with Amazon's other interests. Especially interests around the sale and marketing of videogames, but also content licensing and data gathering. My research in this area focuses on two different types of media productions that circulate on livestreaming platforms – individual videogame livestreamers and larger scale esports media productions. In the case of esports media, many of the largest productions resemble traditional sports media or television game shows, but operate almost entirely outside of cable and television networks. In the case of individual streamers, media production for livestreaming resembles what scholars have described as “microcelebrity” media, defined by higher levels of access, of personalization, significantly smaller/niche audiences, and more precarity for creators.

Live digital media making for the Twitch platform (and its counterparts, Beam, YouTube Live, Hitbox, Etc.) engenders shifts to production practices and production cultures that depart significantly from the frameworks that sustained media making for network television or even streaming TV (like Netflix, Hulu, or Prime). Where commercials and cable subscriptions supported network television production, live streaming shifts focus to what might broadly be called influence or attention. So rather than simply selling an audience to a commercial sponsor, this kind of media finds different ways to leverage viewers' interest. The live elements of these productions place a greater emphasis on direct address and connection, encouraging producers to develop dialogical relationships with their audiences. Elements of liveness and connection enable a subsequent shift in the marketing of these productions. In the case of individual streamers, audiences become part of a patron-base who sustain content producers through subscriptions, donations, and tips. These forms of direct patronage are often tied to the attention economies of these productions, where viewers are paying to participate in some part of the broadcast or paying for a streamers attention. This is especially true for small scale streams where the entire production apparatus is composed of only a few key actors. In these configurations a streamer and a few unpaid moderators are the only members of the production team and their labor oscillates between performance on camera and an engagement with their viewers in chat. These scalar shifts make direct address more feasible and also mean that the overhead cost of production is dramatically lower than other kinds of live media. Despite these

differences, broadcasters on these live streaming platforms frequently import tactics from television programming in order to manage their streams. Relying on coordination with other streamers, they produce schedules, grassroots networks of streamers, and practice tactics in audience management that move their viewers between channels - replicating television's programmatic flow.

For larger esports events, production is more robust, often taking place in studios designed for TV. Audiences for esports media are larger, but even still, marketing generally fails to cover the cost of production. In the case of the wildly successful (by esports standards) *League of Legends NA LCS*, advertising and streaming partnerships only offset the cost of staging and broadcasting weekly esports competitions. The bulk of the cost is carried by Riot Games, the developer of *League of Legends* and the producer of the *NA LCS*. These esports productions aren't designed to net profit from advertising or subscription. Many operate at a loss. Instead, the *NA LCS*, or Blizzards' *Overwatch League* serve as feeder media that build audiences for the games that they feature. Larger scale events rely on the accessibility and audience tuned in to streaming platforms to produce media that serves as a loss leader for games with microtransaction economies.

As content is produced digitally and circulated over emerging livestreaming platforms, market imperatives, production practices, and production infrastructures are adapting rapidly. While portions of these productions remain familiar - the use of TV studios or a reliance on schedule and flow, for example - they are also importing new strategies that sketch a trajectory for future developments in media making. Salient among these are practices that lean on the interactive potential of digital media to introduce new value to content through direct address, personalization, and community building. Moreover as data and platform economies become increasingly integral to commercial interests, reliance on traditional forms of commercial marketing gives way to strategies that leverage audiences in other ways. Rather than selling goods, these media seek to build platform audiences and player-bases as a kind of speculation around audience. As media scholars engage these changes, it become imperative that we remain attuned to the way production changes in response, not only to the affordances of digital production and digital platforms, but also to the forces that pull on either side of these productions - the audiences that are consuming this media and the market frameworks around these productions.