

Title:

The New Practices and Infrastructures of Participation: How the Popularity of Twitch.tv challenges old and new Ideas about Television Viewing

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Abstract:

A central theme in media research has been the transition from traditional broadcast media, like television and radio, to social media and streaming services. For both researchers and practitioners in the field, a crucial concern has been how to understand the emerging forms of flexibility and interactivity that characterize the use of new media platforms. This article adds to this work by analyzing new viewing and audience practices of the streaming platform Twitch, addressing how emergent ways of viewing and engaging with broadcasts both challenges and revitalizes established concepts from television audience studies. For some years, researchers and media analytics have been discussing to which extent Netflix, Hulu, YouTube and other on-demand streaming services represents the death of linear-TV (see e.g. Lotz, 2014, 2017; Buonanno, 2016). Conventional wisdom dictates that only sports and other great events will uphold the flow, linearity and liveness of traditional television (see e.g. Stover and Moner, 2014; Esler, 2016; Dhoest and Simons, 2016). However, our analysis shows how linear-TV is re-emerging in other, novel forms as well. Central to the analysis is our concepts of “*spatial switching*” and “*affective switching*”, which is used to illuminate the ways in which Twitch practices and infrastructures introduces new dimensions of flexibility, convenience and user-control to our understandings of the concepts of “*flow*”, “*liveness*” and “*linear-TV*”.

The New Practices and Infrastructures of Participation: How the Popularity of Twitch.tv challenges old and new Ideas about Television Viewing

(NNa, NNb and NNc)

Television Transformations

A central theme in media research over the last years has been the transition from traditional broadcast media, like television and radio, to social media and streaming services. Both for researchers and practitioners in the field, a crucial concern has been how to understand the emerging forms of flexibility and interactivity that characterizes the use of new media platforms. In this article, we add to this work by exploring new viewing and audience practices through an analysis of use of the streaming platform Twitch, addressing how emergent ways of viewing and engaging with broadcasts both challenges and revitalizes established concepts from television audience studies. While researchers and media analytics for some years have been discussing to which extent Netflix, Hulu, YouTube and other on-demand streaming services represents the death of linear-TV (see e.g. Lotz, 2014, 2017; Buonanno, 2016), Twitch may be understood as representing a return to linear-TV with its emphasis on live streaming. The rise of new media has indicated that only sports and other great events will uphold the flow, linearity and liveness of traditional television (see e.g. Stover and Moner, 2014; Esler, 2016; Dhoest and Simons, 2016), yet the success and widespread popularity of Twitch indicates that linear-TV may re-emerge in other forms as well.

Twitch is a platform designated to live-streaming of amateur and professional content, and has established itself as the leading live-streaming platform both in America, Europe and Asia (Pires and Simon, 2015). Especially in Norway, where we have conducted our interviews, and the other Nordic Countries, Twitch has reached immense popularity. In June 2018, Twitch ranked as number 10 on the Alexa “Rank of top Internet sites in Norway”, coming in just behind the first national broadcaster NRK and before the second national broadcaster TV2.¹ Despite its popularity which rivals mainstream media outlets, Twitch use remains underreported when compared to other streaming and video platforms like YouTube or Netflix. The rapid growth and popularity of the platform triggered our interest, as well as its close affinity with its user constituencies and the new forms of engagement and interaction it renders possible, which will be a central point in our analysis.

So far Twitch has largely been understood as pertaining to game culture, and has been treated as a game related sub cultural phenomenon in both public discourse and academic analysis (eg. Consalvo 2017, Anderson 2017). The connection between Twitch and gaming culture is crucial, but the platform and its use also deserves to be investigated with reference to the wider discourse of audience practices related to online and streaming content in general.

¹ This is the top-ten list: 1. Google.no; 2. YouTube; 3. Facebook; 4. Google.com; 5. Reddit; 6. Vg.no (Norwegian newspaper); 7. Wikipedia.org ; 8. Finn.no (marketplace); 9. Nrk.no (national broadcaster); 10. Twitch (retrieved from <https://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/NO>, 15-06-2018).

While the typical use of Twitch has been to watch and interact with broadcasts of other people's gameplay, non-gaming content has been part of its history and the platform has recently made conscious decisions to nurture more diverse uses and content in the future.

Our research interest is, broadly speaking, to understand viewing practices of Twitch and the configuration of the Twitch audience experience. What characterizes the viewing practices of Twitch users, and how may we theorize these viewing practices in relation to old and new concepts of television viewing? The contribution of this paper is thus twofold. First, we provide qualitative data on the viewing practices of Twitch.tv users, introducing and highlighting the concept of switching, the users' movements and maneuvers at diverse paces with various engagements through smaller and larger spaces. Secondly, we offer a theoretical assessment of the viability of central concepts in television studies – the concepts of flow, liveness and second screens – in relation to Twitch user practices and the notion of switching.

Making sense of Twitch.tv

A literature review of existing research on Twitch shows an interdisciplinary interest in Twitch as a technology, platform and culture. As common with new technologies and platforms, much of the initial research has focused on measures and technical features. Examples of this are Pires and Simon (2015), who estimated that there in 2014 were one million individuals broadcasting regularly out of Twitch-audience of 40 million, and Deng et al. (2015), who showed that the top 10 broadcasters were accounting for 16% of all views. Studies in telecommunications and computer science have dealt with various technical features and challenges related to Twitch, i.e. related to the sorting of the many simultaneously available live-streams (Yang et al., 2013) and the handling of traffic peaks (Ma et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2017).

Several papers attempt to classify the content and types of streams on twitch. Churchill and Xu argue that Twitch has distinct subcultures dedicated to casual gaming, speed running and eSports (Churchill & Xu, 2016). Casual gamers play to entertain themselves or an audience, speed runners are gamers attempting to complete games in the shortest possible time while eSports focus on professionals competing in video games. Twitch contains a surprisingly complex ecosystem of games, and the majority of streamers are playing several titles. This indicates that the broadcaster, not the game titles in themselves, are the focus (Deng et al., 2015). In addition, Twitch has a pre-history – as Justin.tv – of live-streaming of non-gaming content, and has since 2015 again started to make extensions into non-gaming streaming, by introducing new categories such as “music”, “creative” and “IRL” (“in real life”) (NNb et al., 2018). Consequently, we should not consider Twitch as “only” a platform for gameplay streaming, nor should we presume that an interest in games is the only motivator for audiences.

Another approach to Twitch, across methodology and discipline, has been to focus on the importance of community. Quantitative studies using self-determination theory show that external motivators, like feedback, community interaction and audience engagement are the driving motivation for streamers (Zhao et al., 2017), while uses and gratification studies show that social interaction and community was the most important aspect of the user experience (Sjöblom & Hamari, 2017). These findings are mirrored in qualitative studies of streamers and audience (Hamilton et al., 2014). Hamilton et al (2014) argue that Twitch channels should be understood as Third Places, “places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work” (Oldenburg in

Hamilton, 2014:1318). The channel community gets to interact and contribute to the direction of the stream by suggesting in-game strategies and participating in polls about the future of the channel. Regular viewers are frequently promoted to moderators, taking on the job of maintaining civility, greeting viewers and introducing newcomers.

Size of channel, together with type of content being streamed and type of interaction with the audience, when combined, configure the type and feel of the channel. Gandolfi (2016) identifies three main types of broadcasts on Twitch: the challenge, the exhibition and the exchange. The challenge, also referred to as the professional, focus on competitive play and ways to optimize play. Interaction with users is usually limited as the focus is on the performance on display. The exhibition, or hedonist, is more focused on the broadcaster and his/her charismatic abilities than the game being streamed. The play-sessions are more free-form and allows for breaks and diversions where interactions with the audience takes place. Finally, in the exchange, also called the companion, the stream is built around audience interaction. There is an explicit aim “to share feelings, memories and emotions related to the game culture’s articulations” (Gandolfi, 2016:78). While Gandolfi’s approach in combining analysis of content and interactions between broadcaster and audience seems fruitful in addressing different types of streams, and consequently the different forms of appeal they hold, they are still missing a key component: the experience of the users themselves. The study uses a small survey sample for this, but like with the above research on Twitch use from self-determination or uses and gratification theory, the quantitative approach is unable to parse out more complex meaning making processes, and how they entangle with practice.

While the majority of research have focused on understanding Twitch as a gaming-related phenomenon, some have utilized the platform’s combination of streaming and chat to investigate more general research questions, like how to deter anti-social behavior online through moderation (Seering, Kraut, & Dabbish, 2017), and the potential for mediated learning when combining video and live chat (Payne, Keith, Schuetzler, & Giboney, 2017). Finally, in an original contribution, Johnson and Woodcock (2017) focus on active streamers from the perspective of media work.

Overall, our literature review of Twitch did not uncover any studies qualitatively investigating audience or viewing habits to unpack what meanings and practices they involve, making this article a much needed contribution to the study of Twitch as a phenomenon. The emphasis on content and technical features is characteristic of early studies of emergent media technologies, but it is by studying media use as a situated practice we can uncover defining processes of sense making and negotiation of meaning (Berker, Hartmann, Punie, & Ward, 2006). Following in the tradition of audience studies in the household (Morley, 1986), and later domestication studies (Silverstone & Haddon, 1996), we seek to account for the messy contexts and multiple interpretations and practices associated with the use of Twitch.tv.

Twitch Users as Audience

We conceptualize Twitch viewers primarily as audience, as opposed to, for example, gamers, in order to explore ways of theorizing new media practices. As stated in the introduction, we will use the analysis of viewing practices to shed light on the ways in which the use of Twitch.tv both challenges and actualizes three central television studies concepts – namely of “second screens”, “flows” and “liveness”.

Second screens refer to how users increasingly employ other media technologies while watching television – PC’s, smartphones, tablets, consoles – for additional activities such as information seeking, communication or playing. Stover and Moner have called these second screens “companion devices” and noted how they are used by audiences to extend “their entertainment considerations beyond the traditional logics of the existing system” (2014:238). A main concern for all, old and new, media industries has been to tap into such emerging user practices by making media content more expansive, interactive and flexible by adding services and features. A widely used strategy by the television companies has been to develop supporting apps for second screens. Tussey (2014) distinguishes between four types of supporting apps: companion viewing apps (synchronized apps where the user receives additional information about on-going programs), social networking apps (allowing the user to engage in conversation about the programs), franchise apps (offering additional material for free or fee), and “TV Everywhere” apps (giving the user the possibility to continue viewing of second screens). Other efforts at engaging users through second screens include the use of social media, i.e. Twitter for commentary, Instagram for pictures and YouTube for promos. Similar endeavors have been observed in the film and game industries (see i.e. Payne, 2014; Consalvo, 2017). Tussey is highly critical of these efforts: They do “not encourage long-term engagement and creativity [...] They are simply the latest example of a “digital enclosure”, where emergent practices are identified and repackaged in ways that affirm the traditions of the entertainment industry instead of transforming them” (2014:204). As Twitch is predicated on interaction by combining hot (video) and cold (text chat) media (Hamilton et al, 2014) on the same platform, it makes an interesting case to study supplementing media practices and channels. Not least because Twitch itself has been conceptualized as a form of supplementing source, a paratext (Consalvo, 2017), to games, that blur the line between what is the primary and secondary text for the user.

Our second theoretical term is *flow*. In Williams’ (1974) original conception, television’s flow was the central experience of watching television. Television broadcasts were not distinct and separate shows, but a “planned flow” bound together by programs, advertisements, promos, introductions etc. The whole business logic of (commercial) television was in the flow (see i.e. Kackman et al., 2011). However, technological developments from the remote control to time-shifting technologies and second screens have created the means for viewers to disrupt, change, intervene and manipulate the flow and in that way threatened the foundations of linear-TV. Some scholars have considered the idea of flow a relic (Kackman et al., 2011), and new concepts have been suggested to describe emerging consumption patterns for television content – such as overflows (Brooker, 2004), circulations (Marinelli and Andò, 2016) and spreadability (Jenkins et al., 2013). On the other hand, Uricchio (2004) have tried to rescue the flow concept by turning it into a transmedial and user-centered concept. We will look at Twitch.tv in the prolongation of these developments. How are flows configured in Twitch and how do they shape audience experience?

Finally, *liveness* is closely connected to Williams’ original definition of flow, and points to the unique capacity of television (compared i.e. to film or newspapers) to disseminate both live programs, but also recorded content in a scheduled here-and-now way that creates a sense of simultaneity and cohesion across place (see Crisell, 2012). Note that in these definitions, flow presupposes liveness, but not vice versa. However, the majority of scholars have dismissed liveness in the same way they have written off flow (see Dhoest and Simons, 2016; Esler, 2016). It has become a kind of established truth that only sports and other major

news events will carry forward the liveness of traditional television. Dhoest and Simons claims that instead of “the time-structuring element, the liveness and immediacy that were so typical for broadcasting television [...], television has become a platform for content, a “library” of “files”, to be recorded, saved, viewed and re-viewed on-demand” (2016:178). Furthermore, they see this as a transition from “a passive “linear push environment” into an active “non-linear pull environment” (ibid.) – a quite typical celebration of on-demand technologies and practices. The success of Twitch, on the other side, represents a (perhaps surprising) return of liveness. How can we interpret the success in this context? What kind of return is it?

Overall, our investigation into Twitch is about audience practices and the meanings they hold; how can we understand the relationship between screens in the home (second screens), how is continuity and longevity in viewing experiences configured by Twitch (flow) and what is the role of live streams in on Twitch in an age of on-demand services (liveness).

Methodology

We base our analysis on a qualitative study of streaming and everyday life practices, using a dataset of twelve long, in-depth interviews (2-2.5 hours) with engaged Twitch users. The first six interviews were conducted in the winter of 2017, forming the basis of NNC’s master thesis (2017), and an additional six interviews were conducted in the summer of 2017, to complement the data. The interview guide had extensive questions about viewing practices, such as why and how they started using Twitch, what channels they liked and why, if they talked to other users and their opinions on the Twitch community. Familiar with both Twitch and gaming, the researcher (NNC) openly conversed around predetermined topics, allowing for digressions and unexpected relevancy to arise naturally. The interviews were conducted in Twitch user’s home to supplement the interview with observations of the interviewees home life, such as how TV, PC and other screens were set up, as well as live demonstrations of what they did when using Twitch.

Interviewees were recruited by NNC who was an established Twitch user, first through Twitch chat and later by snow-balling. Informants are all anonymized and referred to by pseudonyms, such as “Mats” and “Trond”. Information about consent were explained before interviewing.¹ Later – having transcribed, summarized and categorized from notes and audio recordings of the interviews – data was analyzed using Tjora’s (2018) Stepwise-Deduction Inductive methodology (SDI), developing concepts to be controlled deductively through examining relevant theoretical perspectives. Our initial interest was in the relationship between everyday life and Twitch use, or ‘the domestication of Twitch’, but was honed into an analysis on audience practices and its related theories (liveness, flow, linearity) after extensive discussions (by all three authors) on what characterized Twitch use.

The informants all lived in Norway and were men aged 18 to 32. The interviewee’s educational background varied, covering both technical subjects (IT), craftsmen and health workers, but did not appear to be decisive for their Twitch use. They were all active viewers with almost daily use. Seven of the informants had also some experience as streamers themselves (only two had streamed on a more regular basis, the other five just on a test basis). The lack of women and other age groups was not by design, but we did no explicit search for such informants either. Lack of women informants is likely to render invisible audience practices related to gender. Gender is not a focus for this study, but Nakandala et al. (2016) have highlighted sexism and sexual harassment in the Twitch community. The harassment

women experience in games and gaming related communities shape play experiences and further marginalizes women players (NNb et al., 2016; Cote, 2015). Thus, we see it as a limitation of this study and consequently something that requires further research.

Twitching as Switching

Our literature review of Twitch identified a range of different types of broadcasts, interactions and possible appeals for viewing and engaging with Twitch. This variety was also prominent in our material. Streams were chosen according to varying motivations, interests, needs and moods, and switching between them was so integrated into the viewing practice that some interviewees ran several streams in parallel, with different streams catering to different interests - even watching several streams at once through services like multitwitch.tv. Our qualitative approach uncovered that moving between different types of modes and content was in fact a defining characteristic of use. We refer to this as *switching*, and discuss the interplay of two forms of switching, which we denote as *spatial switching* and *affective switching*, to explore Twitch audience practices.

The two types of switching we have chosen to elaborate on is not coincidental. Back in 1996, Littlejohn commented that discussions on the nature of audiences seemed to involve two related dynamics: “The first is a tension between the idea that the audience is a mass public versus the idea that it is a small community. The second is the tension between the idea that the audience is passive versus the belief that it is active” (Littlejohn, 1996; quoted in Carpentier et al., 2014:6). We might say that what Twitch-audience relationships does, is to resolve both these tensions within one medium/one platform. In the next sections we will look closer at how users switched between mass public and small community (spatial switching), and between passive and active engagements (affective switching). Finally, we will close with a discussion on how we might understand these switches in light of the concepts second screens, flow and liveness.

Switching Spaces and Audiences

The spatial type of switching we identified is between channels of different sizes and types of audiences; between channels of approximately three to twenty acquaintances, and channels with tens or even hundreds of thousands of viewers – millions for tournaments and other big events. Even though the streamed content might be similar in terms of what type of game, level of play and even type of broadcaster, small and large channels provided vastly different experiences. Watching Twitch was not “one thing”, it was a compilation of multiple ways of viewing and interacting that took place along a continuum from small, densely-knit community channels to big, mass-audience channels resembling traditional mega-sized television productions.

When choosing what type of channel to watch, the social aspect was frequently highlighted. The way our interviewees described different channels, the streamed content and communication was interchangeable. In popular streams large number of participants would ruin meaningful conversation (Hamilton et al., 2014), but even with a breakdown in intra-channel communication, the chat provided a certain atmosphere and tone that was part of the appeal (cf. Hu et al., 2017). In addition, the chat provided extra entertainment (or information) as audience members rushed to comment on something happening in the stream or in the game. When switching to a smaller channel, the chat became more personal and responsive. When

Halvard started using Twitch, he enjoyed chaotic conversations in big streams, but he soon started to look up smaller channels too: “I wanted more of a community-feeling. So, I started watching some smaller streams.” Social recognition from the broadcaster or fellow viewers motivated engagement and participation in chat, and broadcasters who ignored chat comments were described unfavorably. For some this interaction was so important they would log off if their questions to the streamer were left unanswered. Johnny explained: “The best thing with Twitch, [...] you’re no longer just a regular viewer, but a person for the one who is streaming.” Overall our qualitative approach highlight how social dimensions are highly configurative of the Twitch audience practices.

Of course, viewing as a social experience is not a new concept. Early ethnographic studies of television viewing showed that contrary to popular opinion, television was not an isolating or anti-social experience (see eg. Lull, 1990; Ducheneaut et al., 2008). These ethnographic studies focused on the household as the unit for sociable viewing practices. It is interesting to observe that for Twitch audiences the social is no less important – but relies on mediated sociability. All informants who were living with a partner or other family had their gaming computer (frequently used as the main device for Twitch viewing) placed in a separate room, often the bedroom or spare room, thus spatially and emotionally placing Twitch outside the heart of the household. Even though they had big TV screens in the living room with the technical capabilities to stream Twitch, it was separated from the rest of the households viewing activities (with exceptions for big events such as eSport tournaments which were occasionally watched physically together). So when our informants describe Twitch as social, it is primarily because of the technical features of Twitch that allows for chat, as well as supplementing technology like VOIP (Voice over IP, eg. Curse, TeamSpeak, Discord and Skype). This serves as a reminder that Twitch, while representing a multifaceted platform in its own right, it also part of a larger sociotechnical network that supports its use.

Sometimes the informants were running several streams in parallel, with different streams catering to different interests. This form of viewing is supported by gaming stations with multiple screen setups, but also because Twitch easily allows for several channels running at the same time. Services like multitwitch.tv allows you to input the URL of several streams and have them displayed on the same page. Perhaps representing the extreme, Marius claimed that he sometimes would split the screen and run up to five streams simultaneously while also playing his own game.

The switching between streams with smaller or larger audiences was a frequent and integral part of the Twitch experience. Streams were chosen according to varying motivations, interests, needs and moods. The switching practice is reliant on the large number of channels of varying content and moods found on Twitch. Whereas YouTube ranges from 300-700 channels live streaming on average, Twitch is consistently streaming thousands of channels (a minimum of 6000 channels according to (Pires & Simon, 2015), 9100 according to (Deng et al., 2015)). The possibility of switching spaces, from streaming with friends to watching eSport world tournaments, which was made possible by the huge assortment of streaming channels, formed an important part of the platform’s attraction. This means that while it is both linear and live, it is never singular or homogeneous – and is consequently flexible in what kind of viewing experiences it supports. Flexibility is a key appeal for our interviewees, something we will discuss further in the next section.

Switching Attention and Engagement

The other form of switching that stood out as prominent in our material was the switching between active and passive user roles. When describing their relationship to Twitch our interviewees displayed a “detached” attitude toward the medium. Statements like it just ‘was there’, ‘didn’t mean anything’, or ‘I might as well watch’ captures the overall sentiments of Twitch’s position in their everyday life and in comparison to other media. Some even compared it to channel-surfing on the TV, which implies a rather detached and non-engaged form of viewing, more about killing time than being actively involved. When compared to the enjoyment described above, with a strong sense of community and drive for interaction, this detached approach appears strange and stirred our interests. After all, our informants were heavy users, in that they watched Twitch almost daily, many for several hours. How can we make sense of the heavy use, but low level of interest?

Interestingly, it appears that the low level of engagement required of them, the easiness by which they could switch between channels and streams without feeling obligated to follow something from start to finish, was a huge appeal. As Jørgen explained while we were watching a Counter Strike streamer: “There’s no continuity with this. I’m not excited about what happens after, I’m not excited for his next match”. Thus, they could always rationalize visiting a Twitch-channel, but felt they did not have time to watch TV-series or film. Ironically, many of them admitted to spending countless hours daily on Twitch, or as Mats explains: “Often Twitch becomes like a background-activity for me. I might sit and watch while playing Magic (online card game). So, if I was to count all that as real watching, it would probably become some hours every day.” Twitch appeared to have little to no demands on their time, so viewing was not seen as a commitment of either time or attention.

Another aspect of this was how it frequently fitted in between other activities. Mainly, they seldom planned to watch Twitch, and engagement was rather a fruit born of boredom in almost insignificant time-gaps, during short in-between moments if they had attention left to spend. Like Trond told us: “It’s not like I plan it: ‘Now I’m going to use the next hour on Twitch, commenting on people’”. When compared to other media, like TV and film, favoring Twitch rested on a feeling of freedom: They didn’t care, so they could always stop.

Once again the flexibility of the medium offered different solutions and supported several forms of low engagement viewing. Johnny explained that he did not really need sound or anything to watch people play, but sometimes the opposite was also true: “I don’t pay attention to the gameplay, but I hear what’s being said”. Thus, they were using Twitch.tv in similar ways to how people often use radio, as something running in the background with spikes of attention depending on content. Though as Mats points out, it is not quite like radio, because it is also something more:

It can be a TV-program, even if it’s mostly a radio. And it can be something social. Like, if I’m sitting down to eat, I can talk with people ... it’s got more functions than a radio-show would have, at the same time of having that function too; of being a radio.

Twitch would simmer in the background while interviewees made food, did homework, read news, social media, attended class, and so on – and especially when playing games. Even when sitting in front of the screen, the informants would use Twitch’s interface and adaptability to suit their current moods and needs – varying window size, position, audio-level, and chat, sometimes minimizing and ignoring parts, while dedicating attention elsewhere. As Erik told

us: “I’ve got Twitch up at all times, if I’m on the computer. If I’m gaming or, whatever I’m doing, it’s on the other screen [...] but I’m not watching it constantly. [...] It depends on what game-mode I’m playing. If I’m playing competitive and want to do well; I’ll turn it off a little.”

In trying to understand audience engagement, and especially the low priority given to Twitch in spite of heavy use, switching once again emerged a key characteristic. Through observation, it became apparent that attention dedicated to Twitch were not static, not either locked in “active” or “passive” types of engagements. Rather, attention was characterized by a frequent shifting between them. This shifting had become naturalized and formed an important part of Twitch’s functionality. From the default running of Twitch as background noise or footage, attention shifted flexibly. Smith et al. (2013) have pointed out how the combination of video-games and live-streaming can create flexible viewing-roles. Similarly, Consalvo (2017) has used the duality between “texts” and “paratexts” to account for the attention-shifts she observed among Twitch-users. Similarly we have observed how Twitch switches from background to center stage medium.

The on-and-off shifts in attention were basically related to factors external of Twitch, such as pauses in game-play, waiting times (e.g. if the user had died in a game) and pure procrastination. But attention shifts were also prompted by Twitch-internal factors: high levels of action in the game being streamed, activity in the chat channel or the broadcaster doing something different or exciting. Though interested in different games, they had developed some common switching practices: recognizing sounds or conversation signaling incoming action, or understanding how score, time, players-left, items, levels, statistics, etc. entailed a promise of entertainment. For example, John would switch his attention if he heard gunshots, or noticed a streamer had reached more intense endgames.

There was two key exceptions to the positioning of Twitch as background media, with frequent centering switches: a) viewing Twitch during events, and b) performing as streamers themselves. During big events the way Twitch was positioned, both spatially, technically and temporally, shifted dramatically. For special productions, such as commercial eSport tournaments and speed running events, some of the informants would move Twitch into the living-room and “main-screen it” on a television set. This form of viewing had a more planned character, resembling that of traditional television viewing. For Håkon, this type of streaming content was so important that he had even used the Twitch-app while in church to watch ‘Survivor GameZ’. The second exception was taking the step from Twitch-watcher to Twitch-streamer. Twitch has from the outset encouraged its users to take this step, and the infrastructure of Twitch is constructed to make this step easy. As we mentioned earlier, Pires and Simon (2015) estimated that there in 2014 were one million individuals broadcasting regularly out of Twitch-audience of 40 million. Among our informants, seven had prior experience streaming gameplay and two considered themselves active streamers. The motivation had been varied, from streaming for friends to hope of fame.

As we have seen, the infrastructure of Twitch offers the users the possibility to engage with the platform in a wide variety of ways – from using it as a “radio-like” background medium to more dedicated viewing associated with watching quality-TV. The switches occurred frequently and swiftly. The use of several differently sized channels simultaneously and the frequent shifts in attention and engagement highlights how the switching is an integrated part of the viewing experience. The domestication of Twitch involves not only

knowing when to switch between channels, to find content and communities that fit the current mood, but also when to switch between Twitch as a background medium to main text.

Screens, Flows, Livenesses

Users employ Twitch in an impressive variety of ways. Our informants are surrounded by screens, literally and virtually. Twitch is a part of their media mix – and a media mix in itself. Twitch is used on different units on various occasions throughout a normal day – in class, on the bus, while doing homework or watching television. Dhoest and Simons talk about “a continuum of viewing practice styles” (2016:181), and our analysis has expounded how Twitch uses can be mapped along two continuums: the intersecting (and partly correlating) small-large and active-passive continuums. An important explanation of the appeal of Twitch is undoubtedly how it – perhaps more or better than any other medium or platform – has resolved Littlejohn’s (1996) two tensions within one medium, one platform.

The broadness of the use repertoire is in itself interesting, with a multitude of activities unfolded within and at the borderlands of one digital platform. However, even more striking is how the multitude of broadcasts, types of interactions and modes of engagements makes switching between them the defining characteristic of Twitch audience practices. Consequently, knowing when to switch channels, content or type of community becomes an integral skill for the Twitch viewer. At no point is Twitch.tv representative of one type of engagement or viewing practices, if anything it is characterized by a collage of many different forms of viewing and interacting, and it is in this multitude of contents and communities that we find Twitch.tv’s appeal. At the same time the shifting nature of Twitch viewing, challenges and revitalizes some key audience concepts. In the final section, let us return to the second screens, flow and liveness and how they relate to switching.

The frequent switching shows us that idea of *second screens* has limited explanatory power. On one hand, we may understand Twitch as a paratext, or “associated text”, in the media saturated lives of our informants. Gray and Lotz (2012) has applied the term to television studies to include all kinds of supplementary material surrounding a specific text, framing and shaping how we understand it. Viewing Twitch has often a paratextual or associated character, where the motivation is to learn tricks, improve skills, and stay updated on game related issues. However, as we have detailed already, regularly the attention and engagement switches and Twitch are brought to the foreground – the live streams become the main focus and the content is enjoyed not as a support to gaming activities, but on its own terms. Thus, our analysis confirms and illustrates Consalvo’s (2017) point about the fluidity and situationality of the relationship between texts and paratexts, meaning that the position of Twitch as a second screen is also fluid and situational. To complicate things further, there are times when Twitch is neither the primary nor secondary screen, but rather a “no-screen” as it plays in the background while the viewer is doing other daily chores (similar to how we use radio). Thus, our analysis show us that it is not inherent qualities in the media itself that defines it as primary or secondary screen, but the context of its appropriation.

Our informants maneuver frequently, sometimes seamlessly, other times chaotically, between screens and streams while switching attention and engagement, from the background or in-between to the main focus, according to own needs and moods. *Flow* in Williams’ (1974) original conception was the experience of a planned flow. If we – following Uricchio (2004) and Esler (2016) – employ the concept of “user flow” to characterize the Twitch experience,

its main qualities rest in the unplanned, the ad hoc and the shifts. Twitch's live streams are not scheduled in any centralized manner, except for some great tournaments, but even then they co-exist and part attention with the multitude of user-scheduled streams. This does not mean, however, that the configuration of the flows is totally out of the hands of the producers. In this article, we do not go into the platform politics and business of Twitch (but see NNb et al., 2018), but we should notice that the user flows also are flavored and characterized by producer-shaped economic practices such as micro transactions and donations.

Furthermore, while television scholars have characterized the modern experience of watching television based on its time-shifting and on-demand qualities, the success of Twitch demonstrates the continued relevance of *liveness*. However, it is a new, more active, and selective form of liveness. It is definitively selective: as we have seen, a basis mode of use is the detached mode, where Twitch is delegated to the breaks and the backdrops. But even here, the informants let themselves frequently be allured to enter into the here-and-now conversions around the actions and happenings taking place. In the more attentive and engaged modes, our informants all have their selection of channels of choice, often of small or medium-sized channels, where they recognize and also are recognized by the broadcaster and the other participants. A central point is that liveness in Twitch is not a passive, push, eat-what-you-get liveness, but an active, pull, what's-on-the-menu liveness (cf. Dhoest and Simons, 2016). Traditionally, a sense of presence and community is emphasized as the advantage of liveness (see Anderson, 1991; Crisell, 2012). We saw that our informants experienced a strong sense of presence and community, created through the interactive affordances of the platform – the chat features, the possibility of co-action, and various other incentives for participation and engagement (see NN, 2016 and Anderson, 2017 for more details). Thus, live-streaming on Twitch offers some possibilities of interaction and communal experiences that is more difficult to foster both on traditional television and on-demand platforms like YouTube.

The television industry has busily thrown their eyes at second screens in a rather desperate search for ways of “doing” television that fosters *more* interaction and flexibility (Tussey, 2014). An important lesson from Twitch is that this may not exactly be what it is about. Rather, it is about facilitating *flexibility* in interaction and participation. Social viewing is often characterized by watching content that varies in intensity, or in other ways allow for breaks where you can chat or discuss what happens on the screen, for example during sports events or bad movies (Ducheneaut et al., 2008). Similarly, Twitch has a range of channels and types of content available at any given times that provides many possible breaks and lulls in action, which makes interaction and social support of the viewing experience possible. Perhaps more importantly, the variety of channels and lack of requirements to join them, makes convenience and control important keywords (Dhoest and Simons, 2016). For those who want to learn from the success of Twitch, it is also important to recognize what Twitch does not do: It does not demand continuous awareness, intense involvement, specific audience volumes, given durations, pre-knowledge or payment. In that way, Twitch caters the users' unstable engagement and attention.

Our empirical analysis of audience practices among Norwegian Twitch.tv users directed us to the concept of switching. We have shown how the combined effort of content creators and users has configured Twitch as a medium for switching along two dimensions: between small and large channels and audiences ([“spatial switching”](#)), and between passive and active forms of attention and engagement ([“affective switching”](#)). Theoretically, our study have demonstrated how concepts developed to study old media still have explanatory power

when analyzing emergent audience practices on new media, for example how synchronous interaction between chat and broadcaster is important in creating a sense of simultaneity, and how switching between multiple channels creates a sense of flow. Switching blurs the line between first and second screens (challenging the very idea of second screens), while at the same time revitalizing the concepts of flow and liveness, which we argue are not relics of a television past, but have re-emerged in some new and surprising forms.

Our study has several implications. We need to be critical when assessing engagement in new media. When describing their viewing practices and the appeal of Twitch, our interviewees highlighted social interaction and community. This confirmed our initial expectation for use. However, when delving deeper into how and when they used Twitch, we found that the “baseline” use of Twitch was as background media and that its basic appeal resided in the flexible engagements it rendered possible. This finding demonstrates the value of a critical qualitative approach and indicates that the issue of flexibility should be a key concern for future research. Furthermore, the disclosure of the frequent spatial and affective switches of our interviewees implies that studies of Twitch, and streaming platforms more generally, need to take into account how users jump in and out of streams, even watching several streams at once, and consequently how meaning is created as much in the juxtaposition and flow between streams as within them.

We believe that our concept of switching could be worthy further development, by studying other platforms and types of streams. How do, for example, the consumption of on-demand streaming differ from live streaming in terms of switching? Also, the plethora of streams dedicated to one topic (gaming) is (or has been) somewhat unique to Twitch compared to other streaming platforms. How do users switch when there are fewer streams to choose from and/or greater variety in content? A limitation of this study is the homogeneity of informants, and research that seek out other audience demographics would be of great value. Generally, there is a need for qualitative research on Twitch audiences and streaming audiences more broadly, especially studies that contextualizes Twitch viewing in an everyday life context to situate the platform use in relation to other media and users. Overall, future research should not be so obsessed with ends or beginnings, but rather concentrate on investigating and conceptualizing the specters and specificities of participation.

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ⁱ The project has not been submitted to an I.R.B., as Norwegian guidelines (at the time) did not warrant it. The gathering and analysis of data is however done in accordance with conventional ethical guidelines for social science; informed consent, confidentiality and anonymization.