STREAMING SMALL SHARED SPACES: EXPLORING THE CONNECTEDNESS OF THE PHYSICAL SPACES OF MICROSTREAMERS AND THEIR AUDIENCE

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Introduction

This paper examines how microstreamers either intentionally or unintentionally share their intimate physical spaces with audiences. While most streaming research focuses on larger and/or monetized professional streamers (Phelps & Consalvo, 2020), there is emerging research on 'microstreaming'—streams whose audiences are often as low as single digits—and their importance as smaller, more intimate spaces (Phelps, Consalvo, & Boman, 2021). For example, given their casual nature, microstreamers are much less likely to have invested in professional level equipment, or to have dedicated streaming-specific areas of their homes. Some scholars have argued that streaming from intimate spaces such as bedrooms can be considered performative (Ruberg & Lark, 2020), yet our current research questions the broad applicability of such findings, especially with respect to microstreamers.

One way to understand these shared spaces is through the lens of place. For example, (Oldenburg, 1989) suggests that for most of us, our social and community engagement happens in "third places" —public places defined by their openness and inclusivity. These are distinct from our workplaces ("second place") and our intimate and private homes ("first places"). Streaming represents an event in which the barriers around the

"first place" are intentionally removed, and spectatorship invited. What is a "third place" to the audiences is the "first place" for the streamer themselves. Professional streamers navigate this knowingly and intentionally (Ruberg & Lark, 2020) whereas microstreamers may not. Applying Goffman (1959), the shared spaces of microstreamers can be understood as an unintentional "leaking" of one's privately held backstage. Such "leakage" could also be understood as an unintentional violation of the streamer's own privacy boundaries (Petronio, 1991) in which private, backstage information is made available for consumption by unknown others.

Methods

As a preliminary investigation, we viewed 17 microstreamers that represented a variety of different activities, as microstreaming is not restricted to videogames (Phelps, Consalvo, & Bowman, 2021). Over 20 weeks, we observed these same streamers multiple times per week, and compiled field notes on prominent objects or scenery in the scene, as well as extraneous interactions such as a pets or other people wandering through the environment.

Results & Analysis

Three major themes emerged. First, microstreamers do not or cannot arrange their personal spaces for audience consumption. For example, a streamer named "a_underscore_potato", used multiple cameras for his VR setup, but these cameras also revealed his cluttered and 'lived in' bedroom (Figure 1). Some microstreamers consciously leveraged this "first place access" as a means of making their streams more intimate for viewers. "Dragons in the Dining Room" (DIDR; a live play Dungeons & Dragons stream) describes their stream as "We are a group of regular people who have come together to play the wonderful game of Dungeon and Dragons and decided to share it with you." (2020) DIDR streams from a dining room table and uses camera angles and chat functions to reinforce that you (the audience) are a part of this intimate setting. While some might argue this is performative in nature, in practice this leverages the casual lived in space as a means of producing authenticity. These spaces generate a sense of authenticity *because* of their unstaged nature and their multipurpose function. The spaces being streamed were *bona fide* first places for these microstreamers that were temporarily and simultaneously used as third spaces for the audiences *writ large*.

Figure 1: Streamers a_underscore_potatoe, DIDR, and Dni0 streaming from their first places.

Second, microstreams also exhibited several instances of unstaged actors or additions to the stream that unintentionally break the fourth wall. In the DIDR setting, the group gathers around a table where the family obviously eats their meals at other times, and there are glimpses of others as they traverse the hallway in the background, often with familial interjections into this shared conversation. During one stream a parent wanders through the frame and engages one of the streamers with a request to complete a household chore. Several streamers were interrupted by pets and siblings during their broadcasts. A_underscore_potato had a friend drop into his stream to continue a prior (off-stream) conversation, which dominates the entire stream because of the small audience size. The notion that microstreamers are broadcasting from their first places is reinforced—real-world intimate others and social entanglements cannot simply be "checked at the door" when the cameras are on. These "life interruptions" illustrate a tension with respect to managing content beyond the streamed activity itself, as during live performance from a lived space there are inevitable disclosures of information and occupants.

The third theme we observed is that these streamers engaged in a wide array of camera angles, techniques, and production values likely inspired by more established and professional streamers. There were drastic differences in how these streamers engaged in their presentation of self within their spaces. A_underscore_potato used multiple cameras to not only show his space but his physical self as he played VR-based games, and his production decisions are informed by *de facto* standards of larger VR streams. A streamer named Dni0 used a home-made green screen apparatus that was literally a green sheet stretched across a frame (at one point accidentally knocking over the apparatus and struggling to re-align it). Microstreamers are observed mimicking the production practices of more professionalized streams. Although these practices have benefits when engaged with precision, their low-fidelity mimicry is more representative of the microstreamer's held institutional logics of how "real streaming" works (Haveman & Gualtiere, 2017). Microstreamers exhibit awareness of more professionalized aspects, while simultaneously offering an amateur warmth and charm that can feel absent in larger streams.

Conclusion
Microstreamers are a sizable segment of total streamers yet tend to be paradoxically overlooked due to their small audiences and non-monetized nature. This study more closely considers microstreamers through the lens of shared space—considering both the elements displayed on-camera and how those elements might impact how audiences interpret the experience.

Unlike the performative nature of professional streams (Ruberg & Lark, 2020), microstreamers stream from their intimate and "lived in" first places. Streaming from a disheveled home office or messy bedroom adds authenticity to streams already understood in part by their amateur status. Streaming from a first place also meant the unintentional broadcast of relational others and through this, private and decontextualized information. These elements, along with the homebrew replication of professional practices, coalesce to provide a sense of authenticity and charm to microstreamer content that is contextually unique.

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