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CREATOR CARTELS AS EMERGENT PLATFORM GOVERNANCE

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In September 2022, a contingent of high-profile Twitch streamers threatened to boycott during one of the most lucrative weeks of advertising revenue unless Twitch addressed the rising popularity of gambling streams, which had recently become one of the site's most-watched categories of content. In response, a group of equally prominent pro-gambling streamers rallied their fans to defend the practice and accuse the anti-gambling streamers of jealousy and discrimination. Within four days, Twitch publicly announced new restrictions on gambling content (Parrish, 2022), successfully averting the boycott but provoking the formation of Kick, a gambling-friendly competitor that subsequently signed several of Twitch's top gambling broadcasters to lucrative contracts (Browning, 2022). As the gambling saga shows, creators ally and collude with each other to produce mutually desirable outcomes, leveraging audiences and advertisers to influence the platform economy. Previous research provides further evidence of collusion, documenting how creators form "ad hoc networks" to share advice on dealing with harassment (Meisner, 2023; Han et al., 2023; Tomlinson, 2023) and pressure platforms to address problems like copyright enforcement (Edwards, 2018), predatory behavior (Berge, 2023; Tarvin & Stanfil, 2022), and censorship (Leybold & Nadegger, 2023).

To make sense of this emergent practice of platform governance, we propose the concept of *creator cartels*, understood as contingent alliances between creators leveraged to produce beneficial policy and economic conditions. Just platforms "work together to remove content or actors from their services" in what Evelyn Douek calls content cartels, we argue that a parallel development takes place among high-profile creators "in response to particular crises" (Douek, 2020). Creators do not simply provide content for platforms but also participate in governance functions like "testing and proving new and emerging business models, and providing robust feedback in seeking to improve platform service" (Cunningham & Craig, 2019, 271). Yet these functions often lack proscribed paths, especially in cases where creators have competing

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interests. Additionally, few creators are large enough to grab platform policymakers' attention on their own (Reynolds & Hallinan, 2024), motivating collaborative action.

We develop the concept of creator cartels and document how they form, operate, and dissolve through an analysis of the gambling saga on Twitch, informed by a cross-platform digital ethnography (Thach et al., 2023) where we traced practices of coordination across Twitch streams, Twitter threads, Reddit threads, YouTube reaction videos, and press coverage. Our analysis follows the critical media industry studies framework offered by Havens et al. (2009), especially in our attention to “the role of human agents [...] in interpreting, focusing, and redirecting economic forces” (236). We identify two rival cartels involved in the saga: the anti-gambling streamers and the pro-gambling streamers. Alongside these primary factions are onlookers who benefit from the conflict, such as the drama community on YouTube who produce tabloid-esque videos outlining the clash (Lewis & Christin, 2022), and those who suffer from it, such as Twitch's policy team, boxed into siding with one faction or the other, and smaller creators affected by the market changes wrought by cartels.

The rapid formation and resolution of the controversy illustrate the agility of creator responses to emergent governance problems (Han et al., 2023; Zuckerman & Rajendra-Nicolucci, 2023). The idea for the boycott emerged in a joint stream between Devin Nash, Mizkif, and Pokimane, with Pokimane arguing that a strike represented “put[ting] their money where their mouth is” regarding gambling (Orland, 2022). This stream followed a major gambling scandal on the platform where streamer ItsSliker was revealed to have borrowed more than \$200,000 from peers and viewers to feed a sports gambling addiction that he was unable to pay back. Fellow gamblers TrainwrecksTV and xQc stepped in to cover his debts, but the perceptual damage had been done and provoked anti-gambling streamers into drawing a line in the sand. “Your profits are your viewers' losses,” Pokimane chided gambling streamers (H3 Podcast Highlights, 2022). Pro-gambling streamers responded by pointing to their copious messaging about the risks of gambling, emphasizing the importance of personal responsibility, and noting that a Twitch ban would be hypocritical and self-serving given that days earlier, Twitch parent company Amazon had signed a multi-year partnership with sportsbook DraftKings (DraftKings Media, 2022).

Conflicts between the rival factions continued to play out on streams, social media platforms, and even in physical face-to-face encounters when anti-gambling streamer Tanzverbot got into a fistfight with pro-gambling streamers Orangemorgange and Scurrows at a convention (Simmons, 2022). The vitriol was unsurprising given the economic stakes at hand in the battle. For example, Adin Ross, one of Twitch's most popular streamers, claimed the gambling ban lost him around \$100 million in cryptocasino sponsorships (The Squadcast, 2022), while anti-gambling streamer Mizkif said he had previously turned down offers of \$10 million per year to gamble for a mere 15 hours per month on stream (Hill, 2022). Ultimately, Twitch was trapped between two rival cartels with economic and ethical stakes in Twitch's gambling policies, representing many of its most popular and powerful streamers. By waiting until open conflict arose, the platform lost the chance to govern proactively and was trapped in the cycle of shocks and exceptions (Ananny & Gillespie, 2016), reduced to making a reactive

decision that ultimately lost it several prominent streamers and birthed a competing platform.

Creator cartels represent an emergent form of platform governance that challenges the dominance of corporate ownership as the ultimate power in policy and economic decisionmaking. Within traditional economic policymaking, cartels are generally framed as presenting “some of the most severe competition restrictions” within markets, resulting in “great harm to other undertakings in the market, consumers, as well as national economic development and competitiveness” (Bruneckienė, 2015: v). Yet the creator economy does not act like a traditional market, and creators do not fall within standard employment boundaries that support established collective organization structures like unions, contributing to the failure of creator unions like the YouTubers Union (Stephen, 2019) or the Internet Creators Guild (Alexander, 2019). Likewise, attempts to create a Twitch Streamers Union have never gotten off the ground, despite ongoing calls for unionization in scholarship (e.g., Curl, 2022) and trade media (e.g., Ellis, 2019). Our analysis of the Twitch gambling saga challenges one of the fundamental premises of unionization: that creators are workers with the same economic relationship to the platforms that essentially act as their employers. Cartelization offers an alternative perspective, treating creators as economic competitors working within a given platform economy; as such, different creators may at times be allies and at other times rivals. Sometimes they benefit from corporate decisions and at other times are harmed by them. Thus, the relative contingency of cartels compared to organizational forms like unions may benefit large creators, even the actions of rival cartels may pose an economic risk to unaffiliated smaller creators. Despite their unequal distribution of influence, we contend that creator cartels represent a novel organizational practice that both responds to and harnesses platform power, representing a promising area of inquiry for researchers interested in community governance and the conditions of platform labor.

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