

From Technical Logic to Social Platform: An Exploration of the Value of New Forms of Video Live Streaming (Postprint)

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Abstract

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Preamble

Live video streaming has emerged in recent years as a communication form dependent on digital space. According to a 2016 report by Analysys, live streaming refers to “a platform built on web or client technology that constructs a virtual reality space where anchors (primarily grassroots talents) provide performances, creations, and displays, while supporting interactive rewards between anchors and users—an interactive form based on live video technology.” In the era of virtual social space and mobile internet, live streaming formats based on mobile applications have broken the constraints of the PC era, moving toward diversified development in both streaming scenarios and content. Currently, the live streaming phenomenon has become a phenomenal industry trend. Based on our understanding of live streaming’s value, in future development, live streaming may become the most revolutionary communication form in the online field, serving as the most important connection method between people, between people and objects, and between people and society, thereby becoming a transformative communication force that changes the world.

We judge whether a communication technology or form possesses future market space and social value not only from its technical logic and product logic, but more importantly, from the logic of human spiritual communication and social practice—examining whether the communication technology and product form expand the freedom of human social action space, enhance human rights and autonomy, increase cultural and social mobility, enrich human social connections,

and so forth. Below, we will evaluate the value of this burgeoning communication form, live streaming, according to the aforementioned criteria for assessing communication technologies and forms.

1. Live Streaming Technology Increases Social Mobility and Expands Individual Autonomy

Any communication form that increases social mobility will contribute to the healthy development of society. For live streaming, when judged by traditional media values, its initial rise may have seemed somewhat crude and uninteresting, lacking necessary rules. However, from the perspective of a new social value coordinate system, live streaming technology increases social mobility. On the one hand, grassroots-centered live streaming formats subvert traditional video communication dominated by elite classes, organized transmission systems, and coverage of important events and major scenes. In traditional video reporting, the perspectives and expressions of ordinary people are absent. The emergence of live streaming facilitates multi-dimensional dialogue between elite culture and grassroots culture in social life, greatly promoting social and cultural vitality as well as inter-class understanding and interaction through the form of information convergence.

Through the evolution from text to voice to images/emojis to short video and finally to live video, everyone in the social media era has become a communicator with a “microphone” and “camera” in the online field. For instance, after the Paris terrorist attacks, the first on-site videos presented to us came from Periscope, Twitter’s live streaming service, whose servers even crashed due to massive traffic from the Paris region. Similarly, at a domestic fire scene, netizens also used live streaming to show the situation in real time. Therefore, live streaming breaks the boundary between observation and participatory expression, expanding human autonomy.

On the other hand, live streaming is becoming people’s most common entertainment and social method. Beyond watching live content, the lowered threshold for self-expression and significantly enhanced self-expression effects make using live streaming itself a primary and conveniently accessible method of video-based social interaction. Viewers can have “face-to-face” zero-distance communication with internet celebrities, stars, and people they follow, such as Fu Yuanhui, Song Joong-ki, and Papi Jiang. For example, previously, world-renowned fashion magazine editors or famous journalists would sit beside international runways and fashion T-stages, exclusively interpreting fashion from an elite logic and professional perspective to influence society. With the rise of live streaming, an increasing number of internet celebrities have entered these fashion frontlines, allowing viewers to watch and participate in commentary alongside them through live streaming. They represent diverse understandings, rich interests, and perspectives of grassroots culture through live streaming, greatly enhancing the social depth of fashion culture and promoting the vitality and mobility of class culture.

2. Live Streaming Technology Provides Scene Value, Greatly Expanding Connection Methods and Experience Space

The value of scene is an important characteristic of future media. In the mobile internet era, scenes increasingly serve as new carriers for human needs, living spaces, and market value. Live streaming technology greatly enriches the compositional forms and functional attributes of scenes. The key issue is that if we limit our vision narrowly to traditional content evaluation, we will struggle to discover that beyond the value of content itself, live streaming programs create various forms of scene value. For example, an apparently meaningless eating live stream may happen to feature people we are willing to interact and associate with, allowing us to find like-minded companions in such viewing scenarios and enriching human connection methods.

Moreover, people often accumulate negative emotions in life that require suitable scenarios for healthy and reasonable release. Under the live streaming communication form, people can form collective catharsis and carnival through certain live streaming scenarios, thereby achieving emotional decompression. Another example is shopping behavior, which from a traditional perspective is private, leisurely, and meaningless. However, combined with current online marketing, viewers can independently control the duration of shopping in fashion markets as far away as Milan or Paris, randomly click to purchase according to their wishes, or even collectively bargain online. In summary, live streaming constructs various new scenarios for future consumption and life.

The change that live video streaming itself brings to the rules of human life games is also significant. In the past, the development of global communications formed the concept of the “global village,” while live streaming’s instant online transmission of internet video creates a situation where time eliminates space, constituting a “space collapse.” People thousands of miles apart can experience intimate and closely connected feelings. We can visit Buckingham Palace in one second and switch to an African refugee camp in the next; we can experience the educational environment of a migrant workers’ children’s elementary school in one second and immediately switch to a top Harvard professor’s classroom. The transformation in perception of space and distance brought about by space collapse, and the resulting changes in social cognition, game rules, and social relations, will be the future of new scenarios such as live video streaming.

3. Live Streaming Technology Facilitates Virtual Content Entrepreneurship, Expanding Human Social Practice Space

Live streaming has become an important channel for virtual content entrepreneurship for the “internet native” generation, opening a completely new path for entrepreneurship for those with talents and ideas.

Centered on the live streaming platform, an “industrial network” has formed, interweaving internet celebrity brokerage industries, performing arts/sports/fashion/entertainment/gaming industries, e-commerce platforms, fan economies, live streaming technology service industries, and mobile phone/VR/application industries.

From a profit model perspective, beyond the existing “tipping” model, live streaming can also combine with online e-commerce, social platforms, and offline enterprises to form models such as “live streaming + social,” “live streaming + gaming,” “live streaming + training,” and “live streaming + shopping,” broadening monetization channels for content resources. Currently, most live streaming institutions have successfully obtained financing. For example, in 2016, Douyu, China’s first bullet-comment live streaming sharing website, obtained 1.5 billion RMB in Series C financing, making it one of the fastest-financed live streaming platforms. Additionally, Huajiao Live completed 300 million RMB in Series A financing, and Baobao Live obtained 100 million RMB in Series B+ financing. The future of China’s live streaming industry is widely optimistic.

In foreign countries, besides YouTube’s small amount of tipping revenue, the other two types of social media platforms still adopt traditional advertising methods, such as obtaining advertising sponsorship through live streaming of major events like the “Super Bowl” and “Oscars,” or pre-roll video ads. Periscope, meanwhile, is more closely connected with news live streaming. For example, Arizona’s KGUN TV station uses live streaming technology to interact with audiences while broadcasting news and streams the program’s intermissions. Similarly, after Princess Kate gave birth, CNN journalists also used Periscope for live coverage. This demonstrates the new social logic presented by live streaming technology, greatly expanding the operational space for human practice.

4. Real Development Trends of the Virtual Live Streaming Industry

4.1 BAT’s Tripartite Dominance in Live Streaming Industry Layout

The US live streaming market began with Meerkat’s founding in 2014 and quickly evolved through acquisitions and consolidation, gradually forming a market pattern dominated by social media and video website giants: Facebook Live, Twitter’s acquired Periscope application, and Google’s YouTube Live and YouTube Connect applications. In contrast, China’s live streaming industry evolved from traditional PC platforms, subsequently forming many vertical and segmented live streaming platforms. However, by 2016, after several mergers and acquisitions, a trend of “three giants” (BAT) dominating the market became faintly visible. Currently, Baidu owns PC-centered “Baidu Baixiu” and “Qixiu” integrated into the iQIYI app; Alibaba owns “Youku Live” built into the Youku platform and “Laifeng,” which focuses on variety shows and entertainment; Tencent has invested most heavily in live streaming, owning not only its own vertical platforms “Tencent Live,” “Penguin Live,” “Huayang Live,” and

“NOW Live,” but also investing in “Douyu Live” and “Longzhu Live.”

4.2 Community Economy Brings Decentralized Word-of-Mouth Marketing

As of August 2016, China’s internet user scale reached 610 million, with the internet entering a demographic dividend period. Mobile video technology and 4G technology are developing rapidly, and video traffic has become a key focus for telecom operators’ transformation and development. For instance, one operator plans to launch a video phone with free directed data for opening live streaming apps. According to Analysys data monitoring the behavior of 194 million monthly active users in independent apps, the entertainment live streaming market has shown continuous growth since 2015, reaching 47.38 million users in Q1 2016.

From a development trend perspective, with the decentralization of the internet, the live streaming industry will further expand. User-Generated Content (UGC), accompanying scenarios, and passive behavior have become characteristics of decentralization in the community economy. On the one hand, from the broadcaster’s perspective, UGC enables universal sharing of fragmented daily scenes such as food, sports, and travel, constructing decentralized content dissemination. Live streaming platforms have begun vertical differentiation into gaming streaming (e.g., Douyu, Longzhu), sports streaming (e.g., Penguin Live), finance (e.g., YY), education (e.g., 100 Education), and other Professional User-Generated Content (PUGC) platforms. On the other hand, from the viewer’s perspective, in the community economy era, decentralized word-of-mouth marketing and viewer consumption behavior based on fans, social sharing, and recognition have emerged. When viewers see others’ sharing, recognize their aesthetic taste, and feel psychological proximity and identification, they will browse and place orders, completing online consumption.

4.3 Self-Regulation and External Regulation Standardization Provides a Favorable Development Environment

In 2016, many regulatory policies concerning live streaming were introduced. The Ministry of Culture issued the “Notice on Strengthening the Management of Online Performances,” clarifying that online performance operators bear primary responsibility for the online performances they provide and are accountable for their products, services, and business operations. The Cyberspace Administration issued the “Regulations on Mobile Internet Application Information Services,” requiring live streaming platforms to implement graded and classified management, establish credit rating management systems, and create blacklist management systems. The State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television issued the “Notice on Strengthening the Management of Online Audio-Visual Program Live Streaming Services,” stipulating that providing online audio-visual program live streaming services must hold the “Information Network Dissemination of Audio-Visual Programs Li-

cense.” Additionally, the Beijing Internet Culture Association, together with major live streaming enterprises, released the “Beijing Live Streaming Industry Self-Regulation Convention,” which standardizes live room identification, content storage, and anchor real-name systems.

The relationship between live streaming platforms and anchors is similar to that between Weibo platforms and Weibo authors. Beyond anchor identity verification, platforms must also assume responsibilities in other areas, such as improving content management systems and perfecting emergency response mechanisms. Currently, taking “Douyu Live” as an example, in terms of real-name verification, to become an anchor, one must upload both ID card and bank card information, and can only start broadcasting after dual verification passes. At the institutional level, anchors are managed under a driver’s license-style point deduction system that regulates anchors’ language and attire. In content supervision, automatic content identification technology is introduced; once violations are detected during live streaming, the system automatically classifies them, judges potential risks, and issues warnings. Furthermore, Douyu has established a user reporting reward mechanism, jointly supervising and purifying the live streaming environment with users.

Through the combination of industry self-regulation and external regulation, promoting the gradual refinement of content supervision on live streaming platforms and the standardization of industry norms will undoubtedly provide a healthy growth environment for the future development of the live streaming industry. This will help the industry shed the labels and shadows of early individual anchors’ misconduct and embark on a path of healthy and rapid development.

In conclusion, the social value of live streaming technology lies not only in changing the form and style of media communication from a technical logic perspective but more importantly, as a new social platform based on the internet, especially mobile internet, it greatly increases social mobility, enriches social scenarios, and expands human autonomy and connections between people. It can be predicted that the value hints currently shown by live streaming are merely a prelude to the enormous value space unveiled in the initial development stage of this communication technology and form, and its future development can be defined with the phrase “boundless potential.” In this sense, paying attention to the future development prospects of this new live streaming technology and form is also a form of humanistic concern for people’s daily lives and future development in the virtual community era.

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Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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