

# GAMING PLATFORMS AND SHOCKING SPEECH: THE ETHICS OF SPEECH REGULATION ON TWITCH

Twitch has become one of the largest digital platforms for live-streaming videogames. In December 2018, the site reached a highpoint of 15 million daily active users (Smith, 2019). These users come to watch – and chat with – the millions of “broadcasters” mostly streaming their video gaming exploits. With the rising popularity of the multiplayer “Battle Royale” genre, exemplified by games like *Fortnite* and *Apex Legends*, Twitch has attained massive success as audiences flock to watch streamers virtually brawl with others. Much like YouTube stars or Instagram influencers, Twitch streamers often adopt a unique online persona in order to attract audiences, hold their attention, and give them a reason to come back or watch more content. For the Twitch community, some find fame by adopting a “heel persona,” or by cultivating the sort of edgy and potentially offensive character that might “elicit strong emotions from a fan base... that loves to trash talk them for their outrageous behavior and controversial takes” (Asarch, 2019). *World of Warcraft* streamer Helena Karamanidou is one of many Twitch users who embraced the heel persona and found that using unfiltered speech in the form of raging, flaming, and “roasting” viewers who left rude comments in her streams raked in an overall larger viewership (Asarch, 2019). In an interview with *Newsweek*, Karamanidou stated “I started thinking that maybe that’s what my content should be since so many people liked it” (Asarch, 2019).



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Though the HelenaLive channel was popular enough that streaming became Karamanidou’s full-time job, her controversial heel persona led to her banishment from the platform for hate speech – twice on a temporary basis in 2016 and 2018, leading to an eventual permanent ban in 2019 per Twitch’s “three strikes, you’re out” policy (Asarch, 2019). After receiving notice from Twitch that her partnership was terminated for comments “offensive towards the transgender community,” Karamanidou took to other forms of social media claiming she was banned without warning for saying she believes there are only two genders in an open dialogue with her viewers (Doyle, 2019). Karamanidou’s ban sent a clear shockwave across the Twitch community as many streamers now realized that Twitch was not shy in strictly enforcing its community guidelines which indicate that “any hateful conduct is considered a zero-tolerance violation and all accounts associated with such conduct will be indefinitely suspended” (Twitch, 2019). Regardless of one’s stance on gender identity, the Karamanidou controversy clearly raises ethical issues concerning the regulation of free speech on the internet. Is it ever ethical to silence



those who may have differing opinions, no matter how offensive or wrong others might consider their views to be?

On one hand, many have expressed their support for making Twitch a friendlier platform by banning or forcing “edgy” content creators to change the way they stream. Streamer Kang Gaming expressed his opinion defending Twitch’s stance on hateful conduct, arguing that “freedom of speech has never meant freedom of consequence. Anyone has the right to ban you from their channel and Twitch has the right to ban you from their platform. Simple as that” (Gaming, 2018). Especially if Karamanidou had already been temporarily banned for hateful conduct in the past and never made an effort to improve her speech, the argument goes, then her permanent ban is more than justified. Overall, supporters of Twitch’s enforcement of regulating hateful content on the site hope that it ultimately makes the streaming platform more inclusive for everybody.

On the other hand are those who believe Twitch is not living up to the ethical value of allowing individuals to speak their minds freely. Not only is this infringement problematic in general, but it directly conflicts with the established culture of the platform. Asarch argues:

Twitch expects streamers to adhere to a strict set of vague guidelines that can be at odds with its popular creators and its legacy. Since the early days of Twitch, then known as Justin.tv, edgy content has been a constant on the platform. Amazon’s acquisition of Twitch changed the landscape, and once-dominant edgelords suddenly found themselves running up against moderators and bans. There will continue to be bans and confusion as long as Twitch tries to reconcile a system that punishes creators for being edgy and offensive only after it rewards them for doing exactly that.

Streamers like Karamanidou who rely on curating edgier content to make a living may have their careers “cancelled” for the very heel persona that make them attractive in the first place. In this sense, it is unfair to expect these creators – who in many ways are responsible for the platform’s success – to suddenly change their content “in order to make Twitch more palatable for sponsorship from bigger companies” (Tonner, 2018).

Finally, there are also those who take a middle road, arguing that Twitch’s mission to prevent hateful conduct isn’t the problem, but that banning Karamanidou was an unfair and overly severe punishment. Here, there are concerns that Twitch does not have controls in place to make sure their banning procedure is fair for all, arguing that discipline “is never unbiased because some of these streamers develop relationships with staff” and that Twitch was extra strict on Karamanidou in order to “make an example out of Helena” (DSGunner, 2019; Doyle, 2019). Karamanidou took this position herself apologizing for hurting others’ feelings and Tweeting: “I had no idea it was such a problem. Greece is detached from the world and if I knew how controversial I was coming across I would have never said anything [or] at least worded it better” (Karamanidou, 2019). Karamanidou claimed that because English is her second language, and transgender issues are just barely becoming visible in mainstream society, that confusion between the terms “sex” and “gender” may have caused harm through miscommunication, even though she intended none (Karamanidou, 2019). How can one learn about unfamiliar perspectives if censorship makes many unable to discuss it?



In the end, with the continuing growth and success of digital live-streaming platforms such as Twitch, streamers are held beneath a microscope now more than ever. Livelihoods made on the platform could be gone in an instant due to violations of Twitch’s community guidelines, especially if such rules are vague or subject to change with transitions in platform ownership. Failure to regulate the streaming site could result in certain users feeling unsafe or driving them away, whereas regulation could drive content creators away if they fear punishment for expressing their stances on controversial issues.

## Discussion Questions:

1. What are the central values at stake in attempting to regulate speech on Twitch?
2. Should community guidelines or moderators include considerations of intent when judging online speech for hateful conduct? How could this be done systematically?
3. It is unlikely that everyone with access to the internet also has the means to create their own website, leaving most individuals online susceptible to the will and judgement of platform owners and moderators. Is Twitch obligated to help its users find their voice and platform for speech?
4. Is there a place for offensive or edgy speech in “outsider” communities, like that of gaming, or should these be held to the same moral standards as business or journalistic communication?

## Further Information:

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