

Philosophical Analysis of Phenomena in Live Video Streaming

Yuanyuan Zhang, Qian Wang
Dalian University of Technology

Live video streaming is a new form of network communication for the real-time interaction between network hosts and audiences. Its application has brought much convenience to people's study, work, and life, and has simultaneously caused some phenomena against public order and good deeds. From the perspective of epistemology, they are the consequences of human's cognitive fragmentation, superficiality, and human's uncontrolled self-discipline ability. In order to fundamentally reduce or avoid the occurrence of these social problems caused by live video streaming, the key points might be not only supervising and guiding live video streaming in time, but also improving the participants', especially juveniles' abilities of rational judgment and self-discipline through providing them with specific publicity and education. In this aspect, the thoughts of "observing things by Heart" and "emotion dominated by rationality" in traditional Chinese culture can be fully used to strengthen the assessment and governance of phenomena in live video streaming.

Keywords: live video streaming, ethics, epistemology, self-discipline

1. Introduction

Live video streaming is a new form of network communication for the real-time interaction between network hosts and audiences, which significantly lowers the threshold for live broadcasting, improving We Media functions of live video streaming platforms and bringing an immersive experience and strong attraction to their audiences. Currently, it's popular in many countries of the world, and lots of popular live video streaming platforms are booming, such as Inke, Periscope, Facebook Live, Youtube Live, Ustream TV, Afreeca TV, LIVEhouse.in, etc., which mainly focus on online games, live entertainment, and host live show, still some on education and conferences. While having brought much convenience to people's study, work, and life, the application of live video streaming has caused some phenomena against public order and good deeds and some ethical issues have brought great difficulties to social supervision and governance. For the purpose of looking for a reasonable way to solve these problems fundamentally, it's necessary to find out their profound epistemological reasons and analyze them from the perspective of applied philosophy.

2. Ethical Issues in Live Video Streaming

Live video streaming is mainly supported by streaming media technology, with the combination of the internet technology and audio-video technology. Different from general multimedia, users of live video streaming can almost watch a real-time broadcasting instead of waiting for its complete download (Tran, Won,

Yuanyuan Zhang, Ph.D. candidate, Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Dalian University of Technology, China; main research field: Philosophy of Technology, Ethics of Science and Technology.

Qian Wang, Ph.D., Professor, Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Dalian University of Technology, China; main research field: Philosophy of Technology, Ethics of Science and Technology.

and Kim 2017, 2057). Compared with traditional official media, live video streaming, with the similar effects of TV stations, may almost satisfy the media technical needs of people that could be satisfied by TV stations, and may also cause some negative effects and some noticeable problems while bringing much convenience to people's study, work, and life.

Live video streaming has its distinctive features in production, broadcasting and profit model. (1) Low threshold: With the development of information technology and the popularization of network and mobile devices enable people to become a host of live video streaming with a networked computer or a networked smart phone, after an easy process of registration in a live video streaming platform, to broadcast anytime and anywhere, which significantly lowers the threshold for live broadcasting. (2) Decentralization: The production and broadcasting of live video streaming are no longer the same as that of traditional official media which require a unified standard, heavy censorship before broadcasting, or multiple restrictions of education background, professional level, special time and space, so everyone could participate in We Media and host a live stream, and the choice of its content could be wider and freer. (3) Abused entertainment: The entertainment function of live video streaming is being generalized constantly, and has been deviating from the normal entertainment gradually. Promoted by economic benefits, the competition among platforms or among hosts is becoming fiercer and fiercer. In order to cater to and attract audiences, network hosts are increasingly taking entertainment as the priority, which makes most programs "have been transformed into congenial adjuncts of show business" (Postman 2006, 4). (4) Abused socialization: In live video streaming, the real-time interactions can be realized between network hosts and audiences and among audiences, and the close cooperation between live video streaming platforms and social platforms also provides convenience to people's social communications. The foundation of live video streaming is to bring economic benefits (Chen 2012, 155). Currently, live video streaming produces economic benefits mainly through "tipping" which shows its special feature in profit mode. "Tipping" is a non-compulsory or voluntary paying method which has newly emerged in internet. In live video streaming, audiences could volunteer to purchase gifts and props as "tipping" directly sent to a host, and the amount of money spent on it totally depends on the audiences' free subjective willingness.

The above features of live video streaming have also led to some phenomena against public order and good deeds, and some ethical issues have brought great difficulties to social supervision and governance. In order to pursue more economic benefits and more attention, some network hosts broadcast a large number of meaningless programs with such shallow content as eating, drinking, sleeping, etc., and with some large-scale vulgar content in which hosts often use vulgar words or dress scantily; even some hosts attract audiences directly by broadcasting some content with eroticism, violence, or abetting a crime. These conducts have caused negative influence on society, and have ruined the social morality seriously. The fragmented presentation of live video streaming distracts people's attention and enables people to be in the state of anonymous with no or relatively absent social discipline. In it people are very easy to ignore their own faults in words, behavior, and the social responsibilities that they should take, which results in frequent occurrence of phenomena like broadcasting large-scale vulgar content and impulsively "tipping" with a large amount of money. In addition, with the popularization of network and communication technologies, more and more people are willing to try new applications, and to find entertainment programs in live video streaming platforms to relax themselves. Many audiences (especially juveniles), weak in self-discipline ability, take much time, energy, and money to watch live video streaming programs, and are immersed in some programs, which will be

obviously harmful to their health. Once an audience is attracted by some content or some host, he or she will possibly give irrational tips to a host, which will lead to the consequence that a host can easily acquire high income with shallow content and become “an internet celebrity.” This kind of profit mode violates the principle of social fairness seriously. But most of these immoral conducts have easily escaped from the social supervision and responsible investigation and thereby dissolving social responsibilities that people should take. Live video streaming, as a new form of communication, the negative phenomena and ethical issues in its application present a severe test to social supervision and governance. Therefore, to analyze and evaluate live video streaming from the perspective of applied ethics has become an important issue which scholars should strive to discuss.

3. Epistemological Analysis of Live Video Streaming

The ethical issues in live video streaming should not be neglected. And the best way to settle these issues is to dig their deep roots. Some scholars aim at the decline of individual psychological literacy, the vulgarization of psychological needs, the over pursuit of economic benefits and the lack of social network supervision. But besides the above factors, the occurrence of these ethical issues can also be explained by profound epistemological reasons. Or rather, it is the consequence of human’s cognitive fragmentation, superficiality and human’s uncontrolled self-discipline ability.

Firstly, the process of live video streaming is presented in fragmentation, which stimulates audiences’ sense organs and distracts audiences’ attention, causing audiences’ lack of comprehensive thinking and judgment and thereby frequently their neglect of the social responsibilities which one should take. The reason for some audiences’ voluntary “tipping” with much money directly to a network host, is that they like his or her look, voice, and behavior too much, and they are fascinated by these fragments. For instance, according to a piece of news in Daily Mail 2016, an audience leaved a tip with 10,000 pounds to a Britain game host at a time during the live, just because he liked the host. Some audiences just want to ingratiate themselves into some host’s favor, but do not consider how this kind of behavior may influence their real life and their social responsibilities. Compared with traditional media, live video streaming is a kind of interactive and embedded multimedia (Goldman et al. 2007, 40). It may provide people with more frequent, more rapid and wider cognitive opportunities beyond the limits of time and space (Zhao 2014, 65-66). But this kind of opportunities is asymmetric, because network hosts need not see their audiences, and would rather not bear any obligation to their audiences. Although live video streaming brings people an immersive experience with stronger timeliness, more choices, more coherent image and sound, this kind of experiences in the cyber world has rare opportunities to be transformed into those in real life. “Images play a major part in the social construction of subjective worlds” (Waters 2016, 849), and this kind of effect is strengthened through the digital information transformation form of live video streaming, during which one part of the complete information in real life is abandoned and the other part is strengthened and represented through transformation and reconstruction (Duan 2009, 164-5). In this way, live video streaming may induce people’s sense organs more strongly, and this kind of fragmentation will be more likely to become a kind of normalcy. The fragmentation during the cognition progress might dull people’s thinking, and cause the frequent occurrence of audiences “tipping” with much money in the process of live video steaming, which rarely happens in real life.

Secondly, there are not unified standards or supervision and governance measures in the ideological connotation, concept of value, aesthetic consciousness of live video streaming, so it’s easy to lead to a sensitive,

shallow, and vulgar tendency. It is not easy to form unified standards or supervision and governance measures in a short period of time. And because of its features of diversification and decentralization, live video streaming itself is in contradiction with unified standards and what's more, audiences prefer pursuing personalization and diversification. Different audiences have different levels of understanding on the ideological connotation, concept of value, aesthetic consciousness, so it's very difficult to form its unified standards or supervision and governance measures. The contents of live video streaming are various in aspects of amount, type, quality, etc., and many network hosts motivated by profit broadcast something shallow and even vulgar, which may lead to the distraction of audiences' attention, the aggravation of cognitive fatigue, and affect people's consciousness and aesthesia (McLuhan 1997, 84), even may weaken people's abilities in aspects of perception, understanding, abstract thinking, and rational judgment (Carr 2011, 201-22). Because of relatively more investment and social support, traditional official media dominate the communication channels and therefore are equipped with superiority to make programs with elaborate content and form. These programs with rich ideological connotation and better taste play a guiding role in the social morality, culture, and education. In contrast, live video streaming does not need much investment, and some shallow even vulgar programs may obtain higher audience rating with its wider and faster broadcasting channels, and therefore, it may become more popular and may produce an effect similar to "the law of bad money driving out good money."

Thirdly, the audiences' environment in live video streaming is relatively private, in which audiences often watch it and interact with a network host alone. In this environment, audiences' self-discipline ability may be out of control easily and they may be totally immersed, and even have such impulsive behavior as "tipping" network hosts with much money. Nicholas Negroponte once said in *Being Digital*, "Distance means less and less in the digital world. In fact, an Internet user is utterly oblivious to it" (Negroponte 1995, 178). Through the information integration, processing, and transmission, the image and sound represented by live video streaming draws people so close to a host psychologically that they may act on impulse. People's choice and behavior may become "adjuncts of uncontrolled emotion" (Wang 2009, 143), and they may also find excuses for these constantly, all of which will put them into bigger danger. In addition, this danger is more likely to happen to juveniles, because they are astonishingly curious about what is happening in others' life, and they prefer to try new things with their own weak self-discipline ability. In real life, there're many cases of the juveniles' irrational "tipping," who mainly aim at winning the favor of a network host, but without realizing that the relationship established through "tipping" is irrational. Although an audience's "tipping" to a host is voluntary and not illegal, it occurs in an irrational state, which will influence the healthy development of people's personality and mental state.

4. Management Measures of Live Video Streaming from the Perspective of Applied Ethics

To avoid the negative effects caused by live video streaming, many countries have attached importance to laws, social supervision and governance, but with little effect. To solve these problems fundamentally, it's necessary to explore the management measures of live video streaming from the perspective of applied ethics based upon the above epistemological analysis. And what should be focused on are not only its external influences on people's cognition and practice, but also the inner leading role of people's abilities of rational judgment and self-discipline.

On the one hand, live video streaming, open and real-time, has challenged social supervision and governance, and the freedom degree of its participants and the supervision and governance over its content have become the most controversial ethical issues (Spinello 2003, 53). Currently, there're thousands of live programs from anywhere in every platform every day. With uncountable audiences, it's very difficult to carry out a comprehensive supervision and governance in time while ensuring a certain degree of freedom. In order to ensure the participants' moral literacy and a certain degree of freedom and avoid their immoral behaviors, the ethical evaluation and censorship of the content in live video streaming are needed, which will be helpful to form a correct guidance and make up the defects of the supervision and governance. The harmful content should be limited and cleaned while the good content with the unification of truth, kindness, and beauty should be encouraged for the avoidance of its shallow, vulgar, and irrational tendency. As in real life where the shallow, vulgar and irrational words and behavior should be criticized and supervised by schools, media, and society, while the elegant, profound, and positive words and behavior should be praised and inspired, in live video streaming targeted criticism and praise, active guidance of government administration, audiences' participation in the social supervision are also needed, which will be helpful to form a public opinion atmosphere where the evil is punished and the good is praised. If we only depend on the network supervision institutions' irregular spot check, or if scholars, mainstream media, school teachers and audiences all think that we need not worry about the chaotic phenomena in live video streaming, the supervision and governance over the content will never be realized. However, the real problem is that serious scholars, media, schools, management departments even parents are rarely interested in the chaotic phenomena in live video streaming, and it tends to be a free world for some wayward network hosts and obsessed audiences. In addition, although "tipping" is convenient for increasing hosts' income through live video stream platforms and provides freelancers with living space, this kind of profit model, meanwhile, brings about ethical issues. Appropriate measures for adjusting the profit mode, therefore, should be taken to avoid the sacrifice of the moral bottom line for economic benefits.

On the other hand, the participants', especially juveniles' abilities of rational judgment and self-discipline should be improved through providing them with specific publicity and education. Different from other animals, an essential feature of human is that human has the ability of self-discipline. One who can control himself or herself will be praised for his or her rationality even failed, "because it urges them in the right direction, towards what is best" (Aristotle 2000, 21; 1102b, 18-19). But sometimes people are emotional, especially easy to be dominated by the fragmented appearance or strong emotion when watching live video streaming, when it "made them prisons without walls for their human users" (McLuhan 1994, 20). People should keep rational attitude and discipline their emotions and show them naturally according to moral norms. In this aspect, "observing things by Heart" and "emotion dominated by rationality" in traditional Chinese culture are the reasonable methods and worth referring to. "Observing things by Heart" is a mode of overall, organic, and embodied thinking, which need use "Heart" to observe and judge (the "Heart" here not referring to human's physical organ, but "the master of human body," Chen 1983, 37, the spiritual subject mastering the whole body). In traditional Chinese culture, especially in the Neo-Confucianism as the combination of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, "observing things by Heart" is advocated to avoid being disturbed by or tired of external things and finally losing the innocence of human nature. Indeed, it's helpful for people to keep conscious and cautious while watching live video streaming, and realize the dominant ethical function of "Heart." And it's rather helpful for people to be keenly and overall aware of its profound impacts on people's

abilities of rational judgment and self-discipline, to avoid the simplification of people's thinking mode and the superficiality of people's cognition, and to overall distinguish good from evil, beauty from ugliness. "Emotion dominated by rationality" refers to controlling one's own emotion and showing it naturally according to moral norms (the "rationality" here, not emphasizing on the logical reasoning focused on in western culture, but on the moral principles and standards, Chen 2003, 283, focused on by the school of Cheng and Zhu in traditional Chinese philosophy). "Emotion dominated by rationality" is also advocated by the Neo-Confucianism in Song and Ming dynasty. Although the thought of "Cun Tianli, Mie Renyu" at that time, meaning that ensuring laws, rules, orders, etc., and abolishing human's desires, has a negative effect, it emphasizes people's moral and social responsibilities and advocates self-restraint. It's helpful for the stability of social life and the harmony of social relationship, and also enlightening to solve the current social problems caused by live video streaming. In live video streaming, the excessive release of people's desire and emotions has caused some negative effects, so it's necessary to pay attention to adjusting the release degree of desire and emotion. "Emotion dominated by rationality" is helpful to establish the reasonable relationship between "rationality" and "emotion," and to defend the moral bottom line for fear that the excessive release of personal emotion would cross the line. Under the direction of "observing things by Heart" and "emotion dominated by rationality," organically combining overall thinking with analytic thinking, and intuitive thinking with logical thinking (Wang 2016, 122-5) may strengthen people's abilities of rational judgment and self-discipline, also avoid the ethical issues in live video streaming fundamentally and actively, but not only depending on passive limitation, supervision, and governance from society and related institutions. Old as they are, these thoughts in traditional Chinese culture are helpful to settle the ethical issues in the application of live video streaming and to promote the development of human and society. With the rapid development and the popularization of network, information, and communication technologies, using a computer or a smart phone, connecting to a broadband or wireless network and downloading an application software to participate in live video streaming for the people today, are not difficult, and the difficulty is that people should not permit his or her brain to lose its control over eyes (Duan 2004, 290) or neglect the organic combination of "Heart" and "rationality."

Works Cited

- Aristotle. *The Nicomachean Ethic*. Trans. R. Crisp. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Carr, Nicholas. *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*. New York, London: WW Norton & Company, 2011.
- Chen, Changshu. *An Introduction to Philosophy of Technology*. Beijing: Science Press, 2012.
- Chen, Lai, et al. *History of Chinese Philosophy*. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2003.
- Chen, Rongjie. *Wang Yangming Chuanxilu Xiangzhu Jiping*. Taipei: Taiwan Student Book Company, 1983.
- Duan, Yongchao. *Internet: Fragmentation Survival*. Beijing: China CITIC Press, 2009.
- . *The Fragment of Bits*. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2004.
- Goldman, Ricki, et al. *Video Research in the Learning Sciences*. New York: Routledge, 2007.
- McLuhan, Marshall, E. McLuhan, and F. Zingrone. *Essential McLuhan*. London: Routledge, 1997.
- . *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994.
- Negroponte, Nicholas. *Being Digital*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1995.
- Postman, N. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. New York: Penguin Books, 2006.
- Spinello, Richard A. *Cyberethics: Morality and Law in Cyberspace*. London: Jones and Bartlett Publishers, 2003.
- Tran, Ha Thi Thu, Yonggwon Won, and Jinsul Kim. "An Efficient Hybrid Push-pull Methodology for Peer-to-Peer Video Live Streaming System on Mobile Broadcasting Social Media." *Multimedia Tools & Applications* 76.2 (2017): 2557-68.

- Waters, Sonia. "All Visual, All the Time: Towards a Theory of Visual Practices for Pastoral Theological Reflection." *Pastoral Psychology* 65.6 (2016): 849-61.
- Wang, Qian. *Philosophical Reveal: From Knowledge to Experience*. Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2009.
- . "Probe into the Chinese Wisdom in Internet Era." *Journal of Dialectics of Nature* 38.5 (2016): 121-7.
- Zhao, Tao. "On the Transformation and Succession of Knowledge Production in the Network Era." *Studies in Dialectics of Nature* 12 (2014): 62-68.