

Deplatforming Panic and Secondary Orality

By Christopher Murphy, Marcantonio Bracale and Victor Loye

“The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is the rule. We must arrive at a concept of history which corresponds to this. Then it will become clear that the task before us is the introduction of a real state of emergency; and our position in the struggle against Fascism will thereby improve”

Walter Benjamin, On the Concept of History

Introduction

Before the age of print, fables and epics like Aesop’s and Homer’s were passed orally from one generation to the next. Orators would perform them in public squares for crowds ready to interrupt and debate the stories and their meanings. Traveling from one village to the next, you could pass from one conceptual framework to another, encountering very different ideas about the nature of reality. Truth was a matter of contention and differentiation. Then, as the story goes, came the age of print, scientific objectivity and unilateral mass media. Now, as the communications landscape gets denser, more complex, and more participatory, the networked population is gaining greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech, and an enhanced ability to undertake collective action¹. The mythopoetic stage never ended, and is reborn in platforms with little infrastructural memory, unindexed and ephemeral, shifting our attention from spatiality to temporality. The medium of the live-stream, reading it through a McLuhan tetrad, retrieves orality while obsolescing linearity. As we read in *Orality and Literacy*, “like primary orality, secondary orality has generated a strong group sense, for listening to spoken words forms hearers into a group, a true audience [nevertheless] secondary orality generates a sense for groups immeasurably larger than those of primary oral culture” (Ong, *Orality and Literacy*).

¹ Shirky, Clay. "The political power of social media: Technology, the public sphere, and political change." *Foreign affairs* (2011): 28-41.

PSB

Patriots' Soapbox is a 24/7 streaming channel active on multiple platforms such as YouTube and DLive. Banned from the mainstream Twitch platform in November of last year, they found a new home in the alt-tech galaxy, coined by Gab CEO Andrew Torba as the "Free Speech Tech Alliance", an ever shifting collection of start-ups offering platforms, apps, chats with the same algorithmic vigilance and capacities of major corporate social media. The aim of this 'movement' is to create an alternative infrastructure to prevent deplatforming on any level, until reaching autonomy from Silicon Valley's competitors and progressive attitudes². DLive is an alt-tech streaming service that is catching on with radical right content creators. Its blockchain-based "rewards system" for video streamers shows attention to the monetization aspect, in efforts to distance themselves from mainstream payment services such as Paypal, furthering their autonomy towards the "Big Tech". DLive promises to return a very favorable 90.1% of donations back to streamers, but considering its smaller user base, DLive is still not nearly as financially lucrative as YouTube.

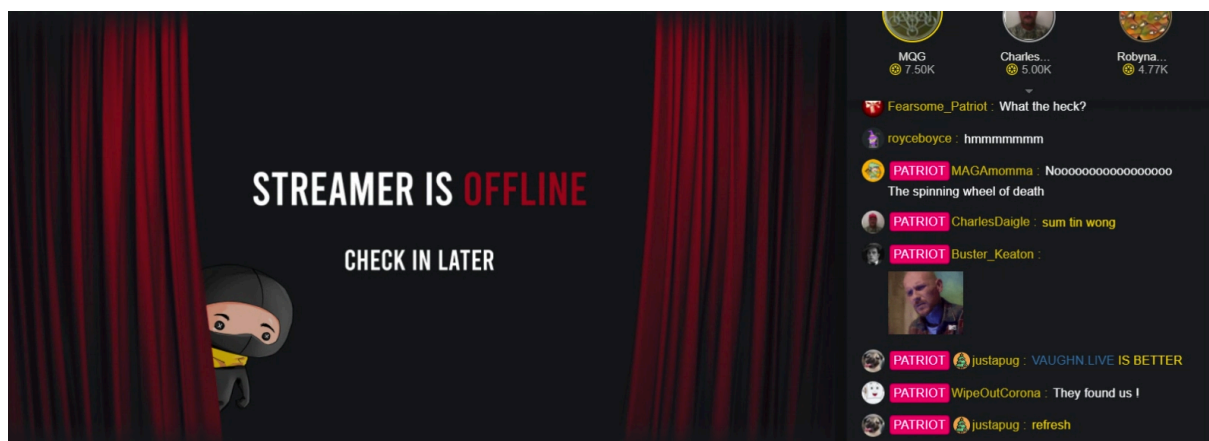


Screenshot from DLive's stream 05/01/2021 at approx 2PM US Eastern time. Notice the similarity to nazi Fraktur font, in contrast with the hand-writing of the Founding fathers.

A soapbox is an old american political expression referring to the boxes that orators would stand up on to address the crowds, similar to Speaker's Corners. The Patriots' Soapbox

² Hermansson, Patrik, et al. *The International Alt-right: Fascism for the 21st Century?*. Routledge, 2020.

political streaming could then be understood as replicating and re-mediating this orality: standing up with citizen mobilization, persuasion, celebrity, community, belonging, and agitation. PSB is live 24/7 so its stream is theoretically never interrupted. Raymond Williams concept of flow speaks about technological arrangement of television, how the medium offers a continuous experience regardless of content; this 'planned flow' is the immobilising and hypnotising effects of televisual programming³. But in the era of multi-directional communication the flow is less planned: the hosts interact with the chat and platform as well as news events influence the cycles of attention. Using digital currency, users can upgrade their privileges, obtain badges, pin messages, and cosmetics like text color to enhance noticeability. Moreover, the stream can be deplatformed, interrupted, de-synchronized, and then re-synchronized while resorting to backups. We observed the break-up of this flow during our observation and the deplatforming panic that followed, sharing the main concern of the other viewers: is dlive offline? Is PSB deplatformed? Where can we find another link? What are the other users saying? Maybe we should check Facebook, or Youtube, or the PSB - General chat on the encrypted App Element. But the first thing everybody thought was: "they found us".



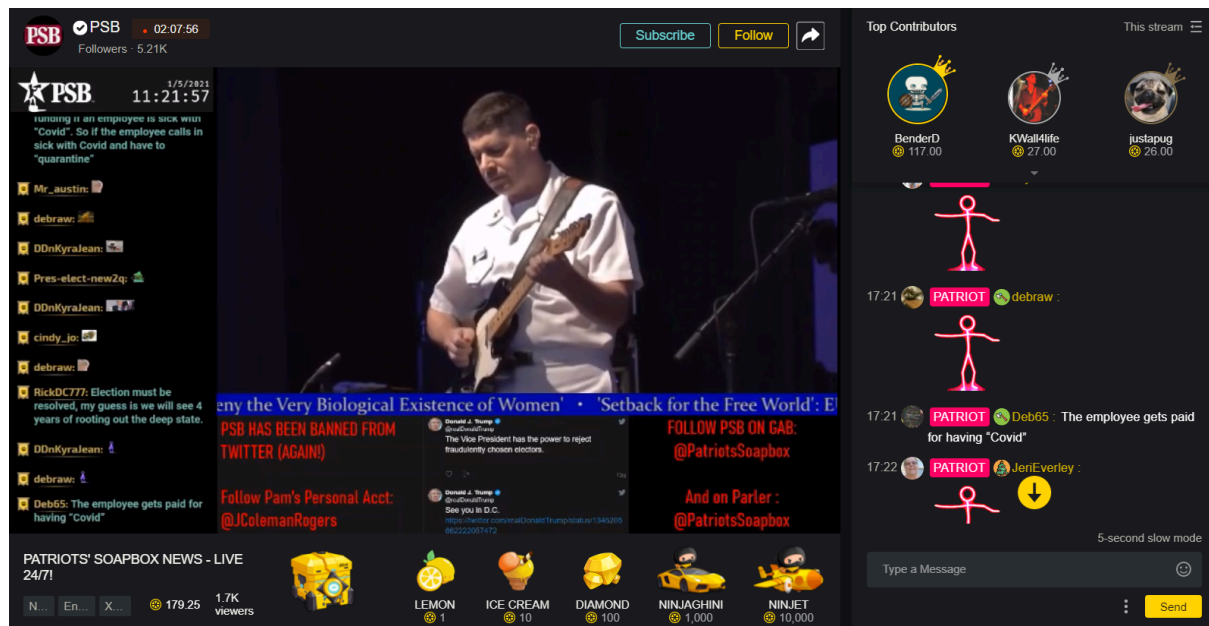
PSB on Dlive down, around 7:55 am EST, 6/01/2021

Like protest and social movements, streams have cycles mobilization, interaction and demobilization⁴. When the temporality of the wave – from rise to peak to decline – stands in for the temporality and the economy of attention. What happens when the stream is ruptured?

³ Thibault, Ghislain. "Streaming: A media hydrography of televisual flows." VIEW Journal of European Television History and Culture 4.7 (2015).

⁴ Koopmans, R. (2004). Protest in time and space: The evolution of waves of contention. In D. A. Snow, S. A. Soule, & H. Kriesi (Eds.), The blackwell companion to social movements (pp. 19–46). Oxford: Blackwell.

To understand this anomaly, we have to understand what is operationally normal. We can see temporality as a social difference and what is shared across the “temporal differential is the expectation that one must recalibrate. Recalibration accounts for the multiple ways in which individuals and social groups synchronize their body clocks⁵”. In Dlive’s live streamings, the user is subjectified and identified as a ‘Patriot’, sharing moments of interactional synchronization such as spamming dancing gifs during a US Navy rock concert, crosses during prayers, american flags during the anthem and the pledge of allegiance.



PSB's chat engaging in Gif spamming while the hosts stream music, 05/01/2021, 11:21 am EST

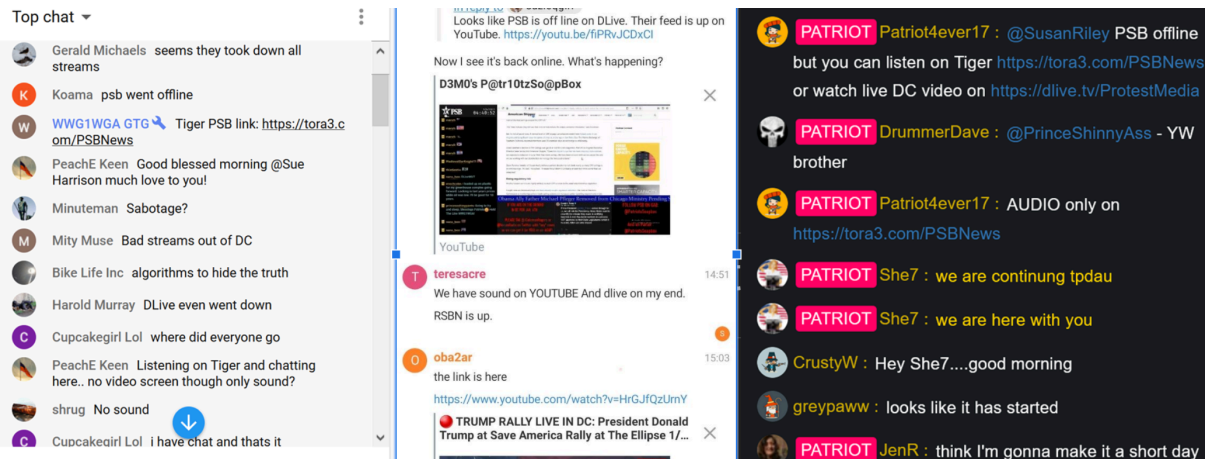
These gamified patriots use PSB's temporal affordances to create a temporal assemblage, capable of switching from sacred to profane in matter of seconds, from a climate of anxiety or expectation, or imminent revenge apocalypse, while the hosts explore the whole range of right-wing talking points. Some of them are watching the same stream on different platforms (both on Youtube and Dlive for example), nevertheless they are synchronized, if not for a delay of a few seconds. Thus, the users obtain or acquire temporal privileges, accumulating social capital through donations of the platform currency, and interacting on a friendly and increasingly regular basis with the hosts. Della Porta proposes this sequence: the production of sudden ruptures is followed by “vibrating, as contingently reproducing those ruptures; and sedimenting, as the stabilization of the legacy of the rupture⁶”. Events of discontinuity and desynchronization have a transformative effect, in that they “transform structures largely by

⁵ Ouellette, Laurie, and Jonathan Gray, eds. *Keywords for media studies*. Vol. 5. NYU Press, 2017.

⁶ Della Porta, D. (2018). Protests as critical junctures: some reflections towards a momentous approach to social movements. *Social Movement Studies*, 1–20.

constituting and empowering new groups of actors or by re-empowering existing groups in new ways⁷.

At 7.55 am (Eastern Time), 6/01 2021, PSB went offline on dlive and on all other platforms. 5 minutes of absolute uncertainty followed. The rupture of the flow of the stream was interpreted as an attack and met with paranoia. Then on the drive appeared a link to another alt-tech service, Tiger Network, that resumed streaming the allegedly deplatformed channel.



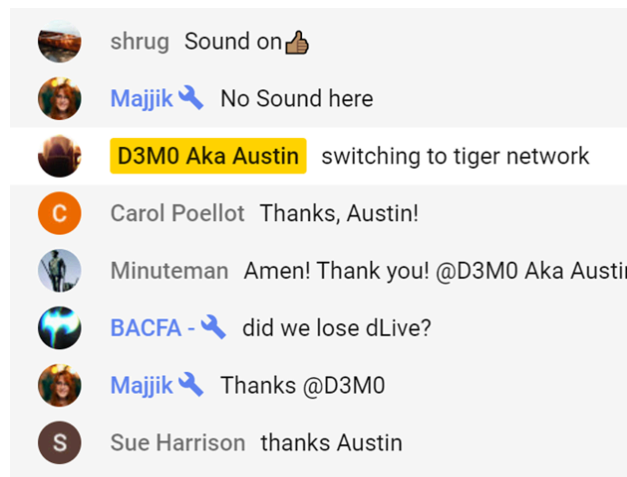
Screenshots of chats from different platforms, showing efforts of re-synchronization with the stream, 06/01/2021, approx. 8am EST

Every rupture of the flow of the stream is interpreted as a direct attack (from MSM, Big Tech, Big Gov, Deep State...) and met with a paranoid sensemaking and re-synchronization cross-platforms efforts from users. But the host is calm. The host knows about its own de-platforming. Asymmetric information and lack of clear verifiability mobilizes the user to share and test different links. Until a Tiger Network link is found, and then immediately reposted on youtube.

⁷ Sewell, 1996, p. 271



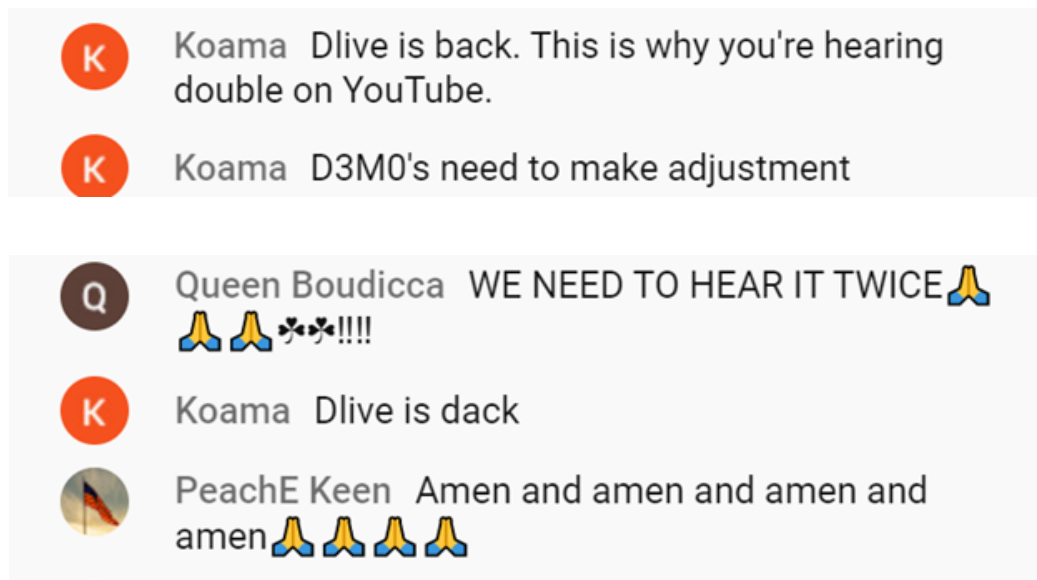
PSB on Tiger Network, a backup stream with audio only, 06/01/2021, approx. 8 am EST



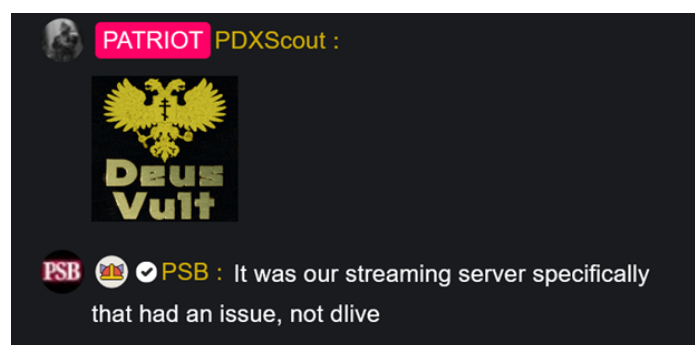
The host of the retransmission on Youtube switching his stream content from the Dlive's stream to the Tiger Network one, 06/01/2021, approx. 8 am EST

D3M0 Aka Austin, the user that was re-streaming PSB on youtube, switches from dlive to tiger after being inundated by the new link. At this point, almost half of the original viewer count (1.1k for dlive, ~500 for youtube) has been redirected to tiger. But PSB was still re-streaming Right Side Broadcasting Network, another Trump-extremist live stream. Forced to move to new platforms and different communities, the users also lose their social capital

regalia, and all the currency they accumulated. Still, they are following the links, trying to recalibrate and re-synchronize. At some point around 8:10 am EST started streaming again audio only, with users seeking confirmation of the absence of video. Then, around 8:30 EST was back again on dlive, doubling the sound of some users.

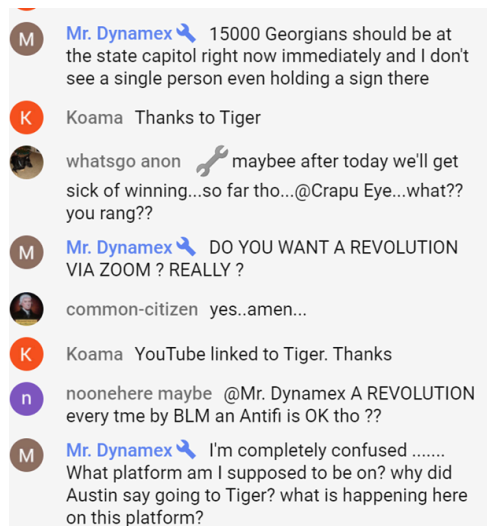


In the end the problem was a minor server issue. It was solved by inundating the chat with prayers.

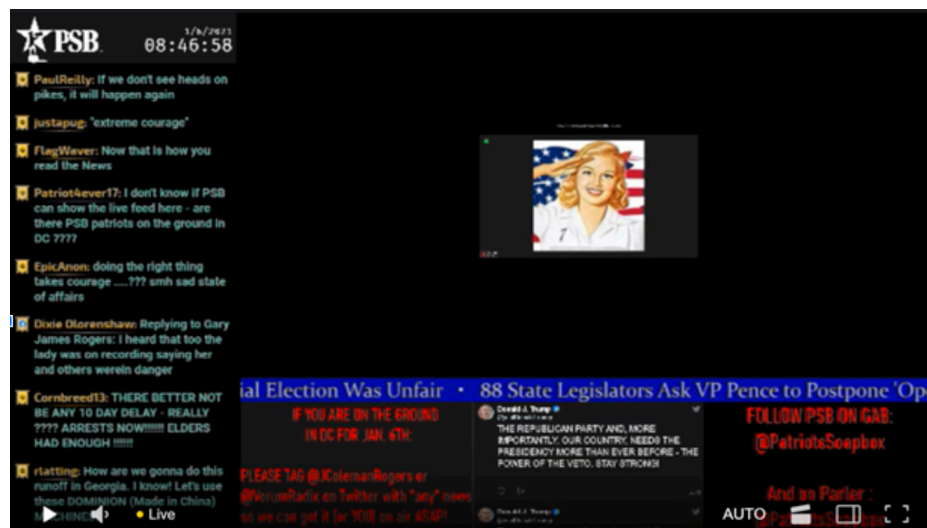


The hosts explaining the crash, 06/01/2021, approx. 8:30 am EST

After the crisis, the situation was still unstable. Dlive hosts continued speaking via zoom. As we can see from the screenshot, at this point people were already showing for the “Operation Storm the Capitol”



Youtube stream viewers not happy with organizing “a revolution on Zoom”



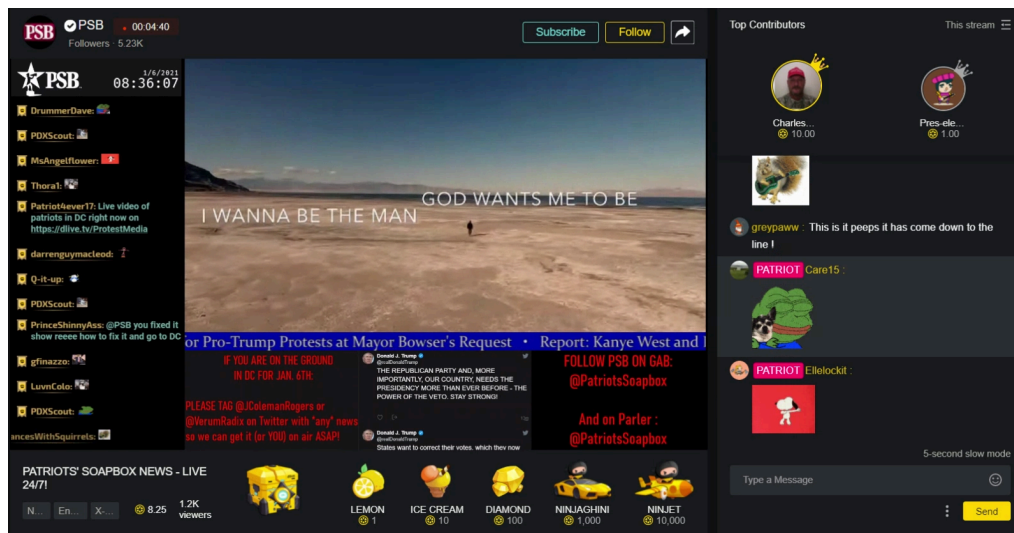
PSB hosts communicating via Zoom

Thinking of streams as temporal assemblages allows us to integrate the repurposing of temporal affordances, to trace the same stream across its transformations and deplatforming, when its audio, video, and chat are disembedded from each other, the communities diasporic and seeking re-synching. How Schutz noted ““consociates” and “contemporaries” are different⁸”. The deep mediation of lived time, requires a “semantic shift from zones of indeterminacy to zones of intermediacy [...] the meaning of time at the juncture of these temporalities remains indeterminate until negotiated or realized by an experiencing subject, so attention must be paid to the acts of resolving temporal indeterminacy [...] time is not reducible to the temporal logics of technologies as their temporal affordances have to be translated into experienced time. It is by identifying zones

⁸ Schutz, Alfred. The phenomenology of the social world. Northwestern University Press, 1972.

of intermediacy where the juncture of different mediated temporalities are experienced⁹". As Poell writes, these "alternative temporalities, which allow for other forms of collective sensemaking than afforded by the dominant temporal regime¹⁰".

The destitution of power through temporalizing practices noted by Keightley is a possibility that not all alternative temporalities are benign or emancipatory. Sometimes what we find are monstrous synchronous poly-temporalities swimming in flows of conspiratorial folklore. It is important to note that the ideological background of the social base of the storming, and of Patriot's Soapbox user base, is the strange alliance between far-right insurrectionary accelerationist and Christian evangelical millenarists. The latter provide a temporality of apocalyptic and messianic millenarism, the so-called Awakening and Rapture, and Trump's Christian base resonated with the messianic 'end of times' promised with the Storm, positioning himself as the 'chosen one' and as an instrument of God against Satan¹¹. The so-called accelerationists seek to catalyze and spread systemic breakdown, inflame racial, ethnic, and religious tensions already present in society, and prepare to fill a prophesied future power vacuum with revolutionary white supremacist radicalization and violence¹².



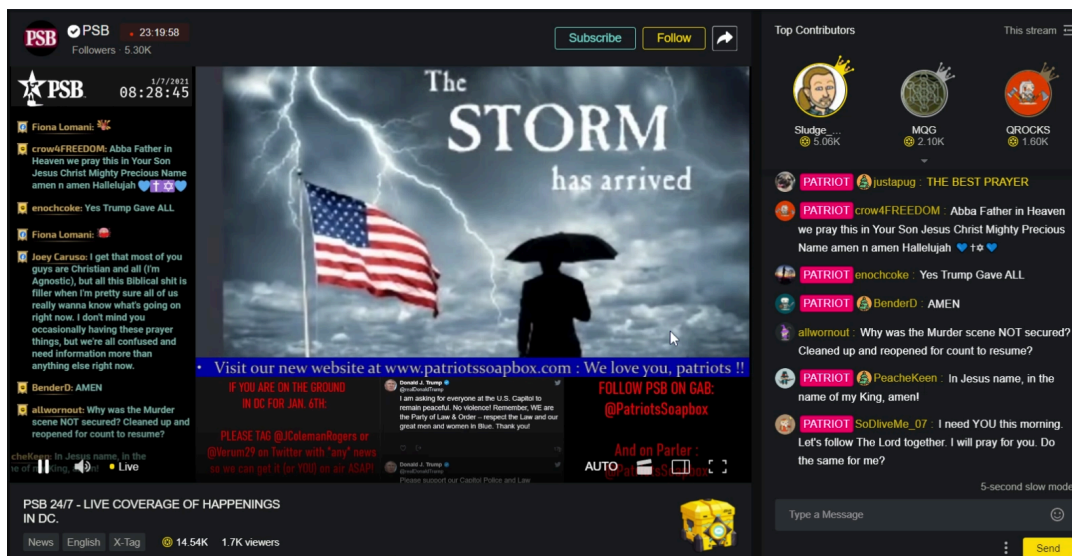
⁹ Keightley, E. (2013). From immediacy to intermediacy: The mediation of lived time. *Time & Society*, 22(1), 55–75.:

¹⁰ Poell, Thomas. "Social media, temporality, and the legitimacy of protest." *Social Movement Studies* 19.5-6 (2020): 609-624

¹¹ McLaren, Peter, and Petar Jandrić. "The fellowship of the crooked cross: Trump's evangelical hounds of hell." *Postdigital Science and Education* (2019): 1-28.)

¹² Loadenthal, Michael, Samantha Hausserman, and Matthew Thierry. "Accelerating Hate: Atomwaffen Division, Contemporary Digital Fascism, and Insurrectionary Accelerationism." In *Cyber Hate: Examining the Functions and Impact of White Supremacy in Cyberspace*, edited by Robin Maria Valeri and Kevin Borgeson. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Rowman & Littlefield, 2020 --- <https://www.adl.org/education/resources/backgrounders/turner-diaries%20%3E%3E%20> - <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/07/opinion/white-supremacists-capitol-riot.html>

An example of the religious atmosphere reigning on PSB's stream, right after the deplatforming panic,
06/01/2021, 8:35am EST



Screenshot taken in the aftermath of the Capitol Breach, 07/01/2021, 8:28 am EST

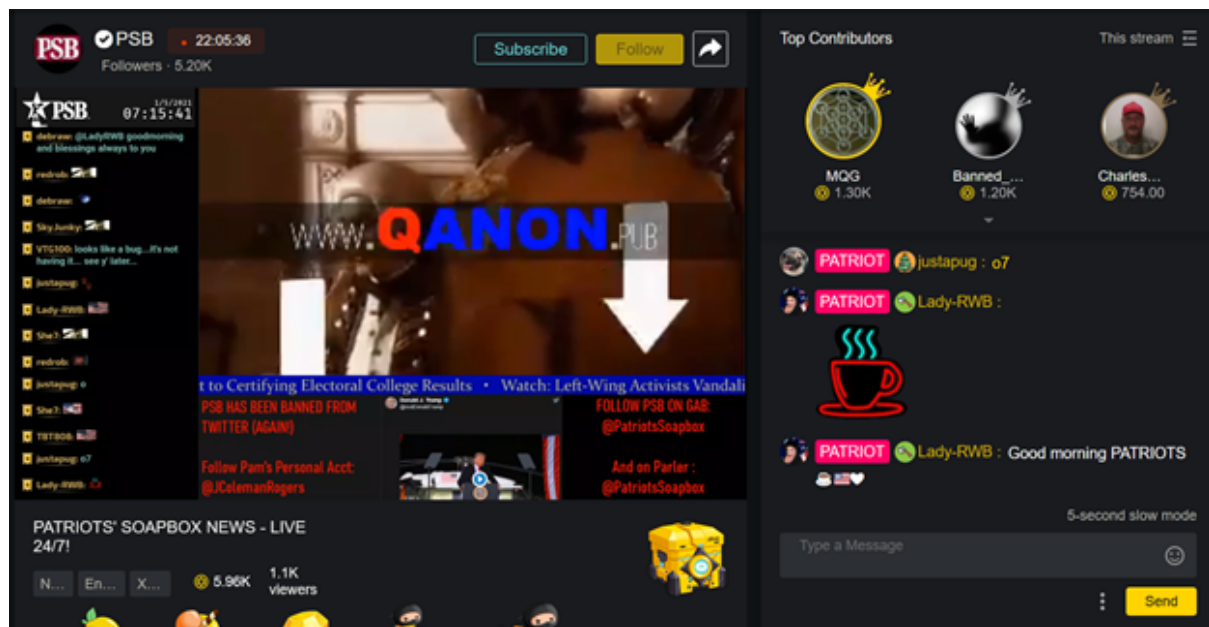
The collapse of vital infrastructures requires de-linking and the creation of parallel infrastructures. The movement's doctrine promotes a strategy of leaderless resistance, where autonomous cells use literature as decentralized blueprints to hone a vision, seek out targets, and implement offensive strategies¹³. These eschatological ideations, Christian Millennialism and far-right accelerationism are bridged by the Qanon, a hyper-conspiracy capable of merging pre-existing sub-conspiracies in a Trump-centered meta-narrative of ultra-nationalist palingenetic renewal (Griffith). Qanon content was continuously referred to, promoted, and interpreted. The *chan image boards received numerous shout-outs and invitation to join forces, thus contributing to the normification of memetic antagonism¹⁴ of once subcultural racist, ideological obscuration of social reality, antisemitic tropes and disseminating it among new conservative audiences.

An atmosphere of expectation was reproduced announcing the Qanon eschatological culmination, the arrest of the entire Deep State, that the Trump administration investigated and fought undercover for years. While the religious and conspiratorial element are more visible, the far-right element is less evident because of the meta-political strategy adopted by the international far-right: "metapolitics – the technique of altering culture to prepare the way

¹³ Belew, K. (2018). Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America. 27 Harvard University Press

¹⁴ Tuters, Marc, and Sal Hagen. "(((They))) rule: Memetic antagonism and nebulous othering on 4chan." New Media & Society 22.12 (2020): 2218-2237.

for political change – is the primary strategy of the White Nationalist movement [...] but to change the culture, we must become part of it”. The leading ethno-nationalism theorist Guillaume Faye wrote: “politics is the occupation of a territory, metapolitics is the occupation of culture”. In the same way, the occupation of a culture requires the occupation of the means of communication, and the construction of a resilient alternative infrastructure. In the battle for the circulation and the normalization of ideas, for conditions of possibility, for the Overton Window, the metapolitical doctrine, the alt-tech galaxy and the now radicalized evangelical Christian network all converged into the mainstream in a so-called fringe insurgency¹⁵, Operation Storming the Capitol, clearly influenced by right-wing aesthetic and memetic tropes. Not leaderless but socio-technically coordinated by a rich and broad network of social media micro- and nano-celebrities, functioning primarily as Qanon Bridges between the more fundamentalist and radical communities.



QAnon advertisement on PSB, 5/1/2021, 7:15am.

Virilio wrote that if ‘multi-media’ brings about the “acceleration of all reality: of things, living beings, socio-cultural phenomena¹⁶”, the “metanarratives of acceleration and immediacy are empirical facts, but not necessarily empirically accurate. Thus the follow-up questions are: when and where do people encounter accelerations, and how do they live with them?¹⁷”. As researchers, we cannot experience these temporalities, like the Evangelical Christian and

¹⁵ Davey, Jacob, and Julia Ebner. "The Fringe Insurgency. Connectivity, Convergence and Mainstreaming of the Extreme Right." *Institute for Strategic Dialogue* (<http://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/The-Fringe-Insurgency-221017.pdf>) (2017).

¹⁶ Virilio (2005). The information bomb. p. 117

¹⁷ Nielsen RK (2009) Review Article: Uneven accelerations. *New Media and Society* 11(1&2): 299–306.

the far-right accelerationist share different temporality, but they both try to synchronize and calibrate the same stream. This allows us to look at the infrastructural conditions of the circulation of these streams of conspiratorial folklore, “exploring infrastructures as relational, collective accomplishments through which content is ranked, engagement is metrified and attention is commodified by links, likes and trackers¹⁸”, and in the case of this report, also repurposed with the drama detection tool, and the evanescence footprint detector.

This observation of the PSB 24/7 stream on the 5th, 6th, 7th of January, besides being exposed to a steady supply of a variety of propaganda, showed us that secondary orality is also a “technology for legitimacy¹⁹” resulting from constant work of negotiation and interaction required to maintain the “networks internalities” as functioning and durable social and political structures²⁰. George Gerbner’s concept of ‘mainstreaming’ names the ideological and cultural effect of this capture of viewers by television networks. Its is true that, through a peculiar folding of the topology of culture (partially due to far-right metapolitics) the “fringe is now at the center” and QAnon micro-influencer like the Qshaman are performing their social media persona in the heart of US State Power. But this mainstreaming implies the polycentralisation of news consumption in disjointed media ecologies. The ‘Mainstream Media’ coverage of the Capitol Breach will never satisfy the expectations of the Patriot Soapbox viewer: she is synchronized on another stream, in another temporal regime, accelerating with a different rhythm and a different direction. The interpretation of these dynamics as fake news to be met with debunking, sidesteps the fact that each strain of conspiratorial folklore is false in different ways. Imaginative visions of a supernatural Trump, neo-Nazi propaganda, allegations of election irregularities etc which, even in regime a post-truth, are reproduced by a complex work of “truth-grounding²¹”. The other aspect secondary orality also brings disorientation and delegitimation, characteristics of the purely memetic “conspiracies without theory²²”.

The QAnon hyper-conspiracy is now a “choreography of assembly”, setting the scene for people coming together in public space²³. It’s capacity to mobilize has been growing. From solitary lone-wolf terror initiatives to massive connective action as in the Capitol Breach. This is

¹⁸ Gray, Jonathan, Liliana Bounegru, and Tommaso Venturini. “‘Fake news’ as infrastructural uncanny.” *new media & society* 22.2 (2020):

¹⁹ Wong, Janis. “Protests Decentralised: How Technology Enabled Civil Disobedience by Hong Kong Anti-extradition Bill Protesters.” *LawArXiv*, 28 Mar. 2020

²⁰ Zeynep Tufekci. *Twitter and Tear Gas*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2017)

²¹ (Lynch, 2017)

²² Rosenblum, Nancy L., and Russell Muirhead. *A lot of people are saying: The new conspiracism and the assault on democracy*. Princeton University Press, 2020.

²³ Gerbaudo, P. (2014). *Tweets and the Streets*. Social Media and contemporary activism. PlutoPress.

why it's interesting to analyze live streams as cross-platform polytemporal assemblages with a specific medium logic. Following their pattern of life brings us to the need to understand eventful ruptures in the streams, their de-synch and re-synch, their attentional infrastructure and acceleration. A regime of post-truth needs to be continually reproduced by secondary orality, by a stream of conspiratorial folklore.