

Growing from fringe to familiar

A platform analysis on BLAST.tv and its relationship with big tech alternative Twitch

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the live streaming platform of BLAST.tv and aims to understand what its relationship to Twitch, a Big Tech platform, is. In the digital age, these Big Tech platforms offer users various services that result in cultural production on these platforms. However, there are also smaller platforms operating on the periphery of a market offering services based on ideological differences with the mainstream platform. To study these complex microsystems effectively, platform studies offer an in-depth analysis of platforms from both a socio-economic, as well as, a techno-cultural approach. Within the academic field of platform studies, José van Dijck's Culture of Connectivity (CoC) model lays the foundation for analysing a platform from six dimensions. These dimensions, which are based on Political Economy theory and Actor-Network Theory, upend the different power struggles surrounding a platform, while also showing how technology and users interact and shape each other. Van Dijck's (2013) CoC model consists of the dimensions of technology, ownership, business model, governance, users/usage, and content. Additionally, a seventh dimension is used in this research to study a small platform like BLAST.tv. De Winkel's (2023) fringe platform framework helps to understand whether BLAST.tv can be considered a fringe platform. Hence, the main research question that can be answered after the platform classification of BLAST.tv is *How does the microsystem of BLAST.tv navigate the relationship with a bigger livestream platform as a fringe platform?* To answer these questions, a platform analysis was conducted on the BLAST.tv platform. Based on previous research, the corpus of this thesis consists of the Terms of Usage (ToU) from BLAST.tv, the 2021 and 2022 public filings of BLAST ApS, as well as, information regarding BLAST's ownership, and a walkthrough of the BLAST.tv platform as a new user. After doing a discourse analysis and an affordance analysis on the corpus, the findings showed that BLAST.tv cannot be classified as a fringe platform because the platform is creating an alternative user experience to that of Twitch. Moreover, BLAST.tv also cannot be considered a mainstream platform due to its size within the market. Therefore, the relationship that BLAST.tv has to navigate with Twitch is something that fits in between a fringe platform and a mainstream platform. The findings suggest that future research in the platform studies field will need to try and find a way to classify platforms that start as potential fringe platforms, but slowly create a new market from this ideological difference and offer an alternative experience from the Big Tech platforms.

KEYWORDS: *Platform Studies, Fringe Platforms, Live Streaming Platforms, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Walkthrough Method*

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1. Introduction

In the digital age, there are an increasing number of avenues for people to consume their favourite media. While this large number of options could result in a diverse landscape of different services, people increasingly flock towards large multinational companies that increasingly take up larger market shares in various media-related markets. This convergence of users, revenue, and therefore power causes society at large to become increasingly dependent on these 'Big Tech' platforms and the services that they offer (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, and Microsoft (GAFAM) are all offering various media services that try to have as much cultural production on their respective platforms as possible since cultural production is becoming an essential part of many Big Tech Platforms' business model (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4277). This means that these Big Tech companies determine what can and cannot be talked about on their respective platforms through a combination of governmental and self-regulation. Users will have to accept the terms laid out by these companies or move away from the mainstream platforms. People feeling alienated by this will have limited options where to go within the digital space, and as a result, will try and seek the very fringes of this space (De Winkel, 2023, p. 33).

Studying the power that these Big Tech companies hold within their respective markets is important. By gaining an understanding of what happens when power converges into a small group of platforms, society can understand the implications of having only the possibility of choosing a small group of platforms. In other words, by studying Big Tech platforms in their entirety shaping discourse about the influence that these companies have over people. One of these large media companies that own the majority of market share on their market, is the live streaming platform Twitch, a subsidiary of Amazon. As a live streaming platform, Twitch is the largest on the planet with more than 2 million users watching live streams concurrently, and almost 100,000 channels being live throughout 2023 (TwitchTracker.com). The result of this size has been the creation of smaller platforms that serve a similar purpose to Twitch but operate in a niche market.

One of these platforms is BLAST.tv. As a business, BLAST historically invested in livestreaming its professional game tournaments on Twitch. However, in 2022, the company launched BLAST.tv, a service that serves the same purpose as Twitch but is specifically created for fans of the game Counter: Strike (Miller, 2022). Tom Greene, BLAST's Chief Growth Officer, also mentions that the basis of this platform is to try and create a stronger connection between

viewers and production (Isportconnect, 2022). This type of interactivity is one of the foundations of how BLAST.tv's mainstream alternative became popular (Sjöblom et al., 2019). However, since Twitch increased in size, interactivity with creators has become more difficult (Yin-Poole, 2024). Nonetheless, even though BLAST.tv tries to create a platform that is based on the needs of its users, it will still keep its broadcasts running on the mainstream platform of Twitch according to BLAST Premier Commissioner Andrew Haworth (Miraa, 2024). This strategy shows that the company understands the difficulty of launching a competing service for a Big Tech platform. Twitch owns such a large market share that due to its size, the largest part of the live streaming market has already converged on said platform. BLAST is already a known entity on the platform because the company has been broadcasting their tournaments on Twitch since its inception in 2018. If the company stopped broadcasting on Twitch it would simply lose too many viewers, meaning that streaming on both platforms is a necessity for BLAST.

This dynamic between a mainstream Big Tech platform and a smaller alternative platform is one of the characteristics that De Winkel (2023) describes as a fringe platform. Understanding the role that fringe platforms play within society at large is an important focus for research. De Winkel (2023) argues that in the increasingly platformized world people live in, these digital spaces have started to become public spaces akin to the ones that people can find in the real world. Thus, by acknowledging this idea of platforms being part of the public sphere, it is important to study the discourses within them. By understanding these discourses, a clearer picture of the broader discourses within the public can be found and discussed. Within the academic field, fringe platforms such as Gab have been objects of analysis due to their explicit resistance against larger Big Tech and their lack of free speech (De Winkel, 2023, p. 86). However, little research has been done on fringe platforms that take a more modest stance publicly against their big-tech counterparts.

De Winkel's work falls within the field of platform studies. This field places focus on the participatory aspect of media (Plantin et al., 2018, p. 7). However, while users can creatively change the platform's affordances, the owner ultimately holds a large amount of power over how the users can use a platform's features (Plantin et al., 2018, p. 7). Van Dijck (2013) builds upon this power relationship between user and owner and sees platforms as a place where this friction constantly takes place and keeps both parties in check (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 26). The field of platform studies thus considers a platform as a techno-cultural construct that can be studied through the lens of six elements. To study these six elements, academics need to study a

platform as a system that combines the actor-network theory (ANT) and Political Economy theory (Van Dijck, 2013).

The combination of the ANT and Political Economy framework, helps researchers understand the inner workings of a platform from two specific academic angles that complement each other by explaining gaps in the research of the other theory. Political Economy is able to explain the socioeconomic intricacies that make up the platforms and upends the power struggles between users and owners of a platform (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 38). However, Political Economy fails to take this overarching power struggle between users and owners and apply it to the features of a different platform. On the other hand, ANT's strength lies in deciphering how technology works intrinsically and how that technology interacts with humans. But the theory struggles in taking this interaction and applying it to a higher institutional level (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 38 - 39). Political Economy and ANT therefore amplify each other's strengths and reduce each other's weaknesses. Combining these two theories gives researchers the ability to understand platforms on a deeper scale compared to only using one of the two frameworks.

One of the issues with Van Dijck's (2013) CoC model though, is its focus on Big Tech platforms. This means that when studying a small platform, the model might not fit well enough to understand these fringe platforms. Therefore, by studying BLAST.tv as a platform based on the theoretical framework of De Winkel (2023) & Van Dijck (2013), this thesis tackles the balancing act that small technology companies have to do. Additionally, it adds to the ongoing academic discussion within the platform studies field by looking at the applicability of the CoC model on a fringe platform. By using BLAST.tv as the object of analysis, this thesis tries to understand how a fringe live streaming platform can operate within the sphere of a market leader. Studying a fringe platform helps to increase the academic body of work that analyses how a platform interacts with both its users and society at large. In order to research this effectively the research question will therefore be: *How does the microsystem of BLAST.tv navigate the relationship with a bigger livestream platform as a fringe platform?*

Studying platforms and platformization is relevant from an academic perspective because of the historical and cultural value that they bring to society as a whole (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 29). As a result, the academic debate on platform studies can be divided up into three subsections. First, research done on the large, almost institution-like, platforms from GAFAM (Van Dijck, 2013). Secondly, scholars try and understand new and fast-growing platforms like TikTok (Zulli & Zulli, 2022). Lastly, researchers try and study platforms that operate on the fringes of the digital space (De Winkel, 2023). These different studies help society at large

understand how the presence of these platforms shape society and how they influence the way people interact with them. However, there is still a gap in the research when analysing small fringe-like platforms that do not necessarily push themselves towards the fringes of the internet. By studying BLAST.tv, this thesis adds to the growing body of work within the platform research area. Additionally, consuming gaming-related content is very popular with younger generations. More than 70% of Gen Z, and Gen Alpha view gaming-related content regularly (Newzoo, 2023, p. 12). In order to understand the consumption patterns of young people, enough academic research needs to be done within areas where these people gather. Thus, studying BLAST.tv through the lens of a fringe platform helps create more understanding of small live streaming platforms and the relationship that they have with their mainstream counterpart.

2. Theoretical Framework

This thesis aims to study the dynamic between a Big Tech platform and a platform that is not Big Tech. To study this effectively, this thesis uses existing research on live streaming platforms and their affordances and applies those findings to two distinct theoretical frameworks from within the platform studies field. Throughout this theoretical framework, I will first explain platform studies from the perspective of Van Dijck's (2013) Culture of Connectivity (CoC) model in section 2.1. After that, in section 2.2., the framework of De Winkel (2023) on fringe platforms will be explained as a subsection of the platform studies field. Then in section 2.3., there is a more in-depth look at live streaming platforms as one of the types of platforms that can be studied through the lenses of Van Dijck (2013) and De Winkel (2023). By combining these different frameworks, this thesis can effectively study the dynamic between BLAST.tv and Twitch not only from a technological perspective but a more complex socio-economic and techno-cultural perspective.

2.1. Defining platforms

Platforms are something that people use a lot in their day-to-day conversations, but it has a fairly ambiguous definition. A *Platform* refers to an "application or website that serves as a base from which a service is provided" (Merriam-Webster, n.d., Definition 6). However, this definition of the term overlooks the complexity with which these digital platforms have evolved. Nowadays, social networking sites (SNS) provide these services for people as well, giving way to social media platforms. These Social Media platforms are being studied through various lenses and methodologies, but the academic field that makes it the core of their existence is the field of platform studies.

One of the bigger names in the field of platform studies is Prof José van Dijck. Van Dijck analyses platforms as a microsystem, as described in her 2013 book *Culture of Connectivity*. Within this text, Van Dijck describes a platform as more than just something where a service is provided. Rather, it is a complex entity with a variety of forces that feed off each other in a symbiotic relationship, akin to how an ecosystem works (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 32). Thus, Van Dijck's (2013) model of examining platforms argues that microsystems should be analysed as both a techno-cultural construct and as a socioeconomic structure. Within this framework, Van Dijck (2013) utilizes political economy theory as one of its foundations to understand how users, the technology itself, and businesses interact with each other and how these interactions shape the platform as a whole. Additionally, political economy theory also places importance on the

interactions that the platforms have with the state (Veseth & Balaam, 2024). The foundation of Political Economy lies in its observation of existing power relationships between producers and consumers. By extension, governmental legislation adds another layer to the producer-consumer power struggle since a platform has to navigate around legal frameworks to keep operating. Basically, this theory shows not only a power relationship between platform owners and their users but also between platform owners and legislation. Therefore, Van Dijck's model on platforms ultimately studies the relationships between the platform, its users, and the state and how these different forces can interact with each other on various levels within society.

The CoC model of Van Dijck consists of six elements. First, the model analyses the platform's technological infrastructure (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 40). The importance of understanding how the technology shapes a platform is twofold. On the one hand, looking at the technology creates a sense of understanding what these platforms do on a technological level, by showing the software and service that these businesses provide. On the other hand, it is also an important aspect that helps to understand how these bits of software and services shape society as a result of the increasing reliance on these pieces of software (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 41).

The second element of Van Dijck's platform studies framework is ownership. Examining the ownership structure of a platform helps to elucidate how platforms operate within their larger market (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 48). As a result of increased market concentration, large conglomerates have centralized most of their technology within their larger ecosystems (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4279). Therefore, knowing the platform's owner is key to understanding their decision-making processes and by extension the way companies position themselves within the larger platform market.

Thirdly, Van Dijck looks at the socioeconomic structure of governance. Outside of governmental regulations, platform owners self-regulate in order to function properly. They do this by writing up Terms of Usage (ToU) that users will have to accept to use the platform. Thus most platforms force their users to accept the social norms of the platform owner (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 50). These ToUs set the boundaries of what is and what is not allowed on a platform, based on the values that the company tries to push onto their users. Observing how a platform is being governed shows how its owner uses their power and can help researchers understand how users navigate the platform as a result of these regulations.

Lastly, to understand a platform better, Van Dijck argues that examining the business model of a platform also gives a better understanding of the relationship between the platform and its users. The business model of a platform influences how users interact with the platform

greatly (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 52). Van Dijck (2013) argues that digital business models have evolved around the idea of User-Generated Content (UGC). As a result, most platforms will have to create a business model that both generates enough revenue for the owner to justify keeping the platform online, while also giving users enough benefits to keep using the platform (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 53).

Thus platform studies are a modular field of study that researches the power structures and modularity between users and the technology that they use (Plantin et al., 2018, p. 7). As a result, platforms have to have a multi-sided business model. A multi-sided platform is different from a traditional business model, in that platforms rely on connecting different users and facilitating transactions between them (Zhao et al., 2020, p. 3). In other words, platforms have to balance their business model to suit both buyers and sellers at the same time. Additionally, Zhao et al. (2020) acknowledge the interdependence in terms of value creation for not only the platform users but also between platforms themselves. This adds to Van Dijck's (2013) point on how different platforms are interconnected with each other. Large platforms will continuously try and link aspects of each other to their platforms, which ultimately results in a complex system facilitating public debates called the public sphere (De Winkel, 2023, p. 38).

For this thesis, the field of platform studies and Van Dijck's CoC model will help to create an in-depth analysis of BLAST.tv through the CoC model. With its six dimensions regarding the complexity of a platform, it helps to unearth the make-up of this new live streaming platform.

2.2. Defining Fringe Platforms

Similarly to a real-world ecosystem, there are big and small fish within the pond of platforms. These non-Big Tech platforms are smaller in nature and serve a certain niche online, just like the largest social media platforms did before their explosive growth (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 15). The CoC model was constructed as a way to study the largest platforms on the market and thus its dimensions are made to work with Big Tech platforms. Therefore, when studying platforms of smaller scale, the model fails to acknowledge the small platform's position relative to its Big Tech counterpart. Thus scholars that study small platforms use altered concepts within their framework to study these small platforms on the periphery of the market. Within this subsection, the concept of fringe platform is used to define non-Big Tech platforms with a conflicting stance towards their Big Tech alternatives (De Winkel, 2023, p. 17).

Fringe platforms are, in the field of academics, mostly understood as a platform that operates outside of the sphere of larger mainstream platforms (De Winkel, 2023, p. 35). Thus,

these fringe platforms can serve a niche audience with specific wants and needs (Spilker & Colbjørnsen, 2020, p. 1221). Twitch as a platform has slowly moved away from a gaming-focused platform, towards a more general platform for livestreaming (Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018; Sjöblom et al., 2019; Spilker & Colbjørnsen, 2020). As a result, Twitch has to create a platform that caters to the needs of a more diverse audience. Ultimately, this means that Twitch as a platform cannot serve users who only want to consume video game live streams (Spilker & Colbjørnsen, 2020, p. 1221).

However, there is a clear difference between catering to a niche audience and the platform positioning itself in an ideologically different place compared to mainstream alternatives. For example, Gab was created as a clear ideological alternative to Twitter based on free speech (Dehghan & Nagappa, 2022, p. 2). Further research on these different platforms has found that these fringe platforms need to antagonize their mainstream alternative to become a space where a different opinion is voiced compared to the masses (Dehghan & Nagappa, 2022, p. 3). De Winkel (2023), however, takes a more nuanced stance towards fringe platforms. They argue that an essential part of fringe platforms is the ideological difference that they have with mainstream platforms, but not that fringe platforms will have to antagonize the mainstream platform. Nonetheless, a fringe platform will still mostly be defined by its difference in ideology from the Big Tech alternative. A fringe platform will therefore not be able to stand outside of the sphere of influence of a mainstream platform and will have to acknowledge its mainstream alternative in some capacity (De Winkel, 2023, p. 12). This distinction between fringe platforms and mainstream platforms means that by analysing a fringe platform, researchers are able to understand the discourse that surrounds these smaller platforms.

De Winkel (2023) offers an additional framework on fringe platforms that will help understand the relationship between BLAST.tv and Twitch through the lens of a fringe platform and their Big Tech alternative. If BLAST.tv can be characterized as a fringe platform, it helps to broaden the academic field of platform studies through this case study. On the other hand, if BLAST.tv is not found to be a fringe platform in the way that De Winkel explains it, it furthers the academic field of platform studies in a way that can better differentiate between strictly a fringe platform and small platforms operating on the periphery of a market.

2.3. Live Streaming Platforms, Mainstream & Fringe

The combination of Van Dijck's CoC model and De Winkel's additions for fringe platforms offer a strong foundation for studying platforms of a large variety. In her 2013 book *Culture of*

Connectivity, Van Dijck already analysed Facebook, Twitter (now X), Flickr, YouTube, and Wikipedia, to show the versatility of the CoC model. However, one type of platform omitted from this analysis is a live streaming platform, like Twitch that is owned by Amazon. Live streaming platforms are based on the idea of participatory culture. When watching a live stream, users have the ability to engage directly with the producer and other viewers through chat functionality. This direct contact between users and producers creates a shared emotional connect between people (Sjöblom & Hamari, 2017, p. 988). Live streaming platforms share similarities with video-on-demand (VOD) platforms such as YouTube, where the content is also produced by amateur producers who can create their own programming on the website (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 138). However, unlike VOD platforms, live streaming platforms offer a stronger sense of parasocial relationships due to the viewers being able to interact directly with the producer in a live setting (Li et al., 2020, p. 10). Therefore, although live streaming platforms share some similarities to VOD platforms, there are crucial details that differentiate them from each other.

Similarly, live streaming also has some parallels to traditional TV (Spilker et al., 2020, p. 611). Both offer content that is long-form and cannot be skipped during broadcast. However, the core difference between these platforms is in the way users shape the medium. Whereas TV is a medium that makes the audience passive members while catering to a large group, live streaming gives its users a more active role in the creation of content (Spilker et al., 2020, p. 611). Also, live streams offer a constant flow of high and low levels of entertainment. Nonetheless, watching live streaming content requires little active involvement from the viewer due to its long-form nature meaning that users will not feel strongly attached to a single stream (Spilker et al., 2020, p. 614). The producers circumvent this problem by creating a sense of belonging for their viewers resulting in a parasocial relationship between streamer and their viewers (Woodcock & Johnson, 2019, p. 814). This means that consuming live streams is paradoxically something that requires little attention while creating a strong bond between viewers and producers at the same time. Since the content on a platform like Twitch lets producers create a digital product infused with their personality, similar to YouTube's slogan of "broadcast yourself Self", means that the technology of live stream platforms will have to adhere to these social norms (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 134).

Twitch's social norms have been created and changed by its users since the platform's inception. This means that throughout Twitch's existence, users have created affordances that adhere to the standards set out by the platform, and its creators and users. The modern idea of

affordances is how a certain design influences the way people use something, and social affordances build upon that idea by also taking into account how a group of people can influence the way features can be used outside of its initial use case (Sjöblom et al., 2019, p. 26). More specifically, in the current day social affordances are a result of a trend in the early 2000s where new media pushed the idea of a collective idea of the internet (van Dijck, 2013, p. 21). The idea of Web 2.0 resulted in the creation of user-centric platforms that are shaped by users while also influencing the lives of the very same people shaping the platform. This means that when looking at specific cases, such as Twitch, the important elements that are considered to be social affordances on the platform will have been created from this symbiotic relationship between streamers, users turned into producers, and their audience.

And this symbiotic relationship between streamers and their audience can be found in many different affordances on the platform. Sjöblom et al. (2019) mentions that Twitch's affordances are all based on the idea of social connectivity. The social connectivity can be found in several elements of most streams and aim to create a sense of connectedness between a producer and their audience (Sjöblom et al., 2019, p. 26). In line with this are the findings of other researchers that indicate a necessity for an emotional bond between the streamer and its audience (Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018, p. 63; Sjöblom & Hamari, 2017, p. 991). This parasocial relationship between users and producers is an important aspect of how live streaming platforms are shaped through shared meaning-making (van Dijck, 2013, p.40). Thus creating a strong relationship between user and producer is important for a live streaming platform and the elements of said platform should therefore reflect this necessity.

As for Twitch, several elements support the creation of a parasocial relationship between producer and user. For example, Sjöblom et al. (2019) found that producers block off various parts of the game while playing. Instead of the game, streamers place a webcam for the audience to see the producer. The blockage of certain aspects of the game does not repel users it seems. In another research, it was found that none of the reasons for watching a Twitch stream were influenced by the game itself but rather by the social connection with the streamer (Sjöblom & Hamari, 2017). By understanding the social connections between users and producers, the connection between viewing, playing, and spending on video games becomes clearer. Wohn and Freeman (2020), found a significant correlation between the playtime and the number of hours watching a livestream indicating the sense of mental investment needed for a strong connection between a streamer and viewer. This means that Twitch is essentially creating communities around producers and the games that they play for their audience.

Watching live streams is something that young adults do as part of their leisure activities (Newzoo, 2023, p. 12). Therefore, traditional companies try to associate themselves with the producers on Twitch. This has resulted in an uptick in Professional Generated User Content (PGUC), even though users historically have had the ability to create a personal brand. While affordances are designed to make it clear to users how a feature should be used on the platform, social factors can influence and change how a feature is used over time (Sjöblom et al., 2019, p. 26). This means that affordances are changing not only based on how users interact with the different features on a platform, but also based on how they interact with each other and with forces outside the platform (Sjöblom et al., 2019, p. 27). Since Twitch's content is based on UGC it means that large corporations lose aspects of the digital content distribution pipeline (Johnson & Woodcock, 2019, p. 684). These corporations do not want to be aligned with creators that would harm themselves. As a result, streamers on Twitch have slowly turned into more professional versions of themselves in order to seem attractive for a sponsor deal with a traditional company (Sjöblom et al., 2019, p. 8). The resulting trend means that streaming platforms are slowly turning into a mixture of traditional high-quality production TV and personalized social media production.

This combination of high-quality and personalized media production is also how BLAST.tv differentiates itself from Twitch. Historically, the company produces and broadcasts professional game tournaments on live streaming platforms such as Twitch. This means that the content that BLAST streams to Twitch is of high quality and closer to something like a sports broadcast than it is to UGC. As a result, the product on BLAST.tv should also be based on these professional broadcasts. This shows an ideological difference between BLAST.tv and Twitch, as to what type of content the two platforms consider to be the foundation of a live streaming platform. Whereas Twitch is the mainstream platform within the live streaming market and operates on a UGC model, BLAST is offering a niche product for a more niche audience that seeks live streams of professionally produced gaming tournaments. This ideological difference is the average dynamic between Big Tech and a fringe platform that De Winkel (2023) describes. And by extension, this difference between BLAST and Twitch offers insight into whether BLAST.tv is a fringe platform in the first place. Van Dijck's (2013) framework of platform analysis and De Winkel's (2023) concept of fringe platforms create a strong foundation for a framework when researching a live streaming platform. However, there are more comprehensive elements needed to understand how BLAST.tv navigates its relationship with Twitch. Unfortunately, since BLAST.tv is a new platform, little to no academic research has been done on the platform. While these two platforms are not a one-to-one replacement, their position

within the live streaming market means that BLAST.tv sees itself as an alternative to Twitch. Different researched elements of Twitch should therefore also apply to BLAST's platform as well to a certain extent. So, in order to understand BLAST.tv, a deep understanding of Twitch's affordances can be used as part of the research. This is also supported by the normalisation of professionalism on Twitch. With the rise in certain levels of professionalisation that have occurred on the platform, BLAST.tv offers users a further evolution of this element on Twitch. A platform only consisting of professionally made content.

2.4. Analysing the Political Economy of the Live Streaming Platform BLAST.tv

Van Dijck (2013) utilizes political economy as a foundation for their platform studies framework. Since political economy theory examines the relationship between political, economic, and social structures, the model of Van Dijck acknowledges these different structures and how they interact with each other from a techno-cultural and a socioeconomic standpoint (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 39). For this thesis to effectively analyse a live streaming platform like BLAST.tv, it divides these six elements into the three already overlapping concepts of technology and governance, ownership and business models, and users/usage and content.

Additionally, this theoretical framework incorporates the changes that De Winkel (2023) makes to the definition of the dimension of governance. This is because De Winkel (2023) accurately describes the idea of a platform not only being governed by a governmental body but also governing itself through legal documents like the ToU. This means that instead of analysing a live stream platform through a legal framework, this thesis can analyse BLAST's self-governing ideas more effectively. Similarly, this thesis will also look at the dimension of 'publics' per De Winkel's (2023) research on fringe platforms. The dimension of publics shifts the definition of Van Dijck's (2013) understanding of users/usage and places the term in the public domain instead of only within the platform (De Winkel, 2023, p. 66).

On top of that, this thesis has to create a framework in which it can analyse BLAST.tv. Due to the platform being new and operating within a niche of the live streaming market. Therefore, the thesis will utilize general affordances present within the literature pertaining to Twitch and examine whether these also apply to BLAST.tv. For example, since an affordance such as blocking part of the gameplay with a camera feed of the streamer exists for Twitch, this affordance can be extrapolated, since BLAST.tv positions itself as an alternative to Twitch.

3. Methodology: A Platform Analysis

The aim of this thesis is two-fold. First, by studying the live streaming platform BLAST.tv, this thesis builds on the academic field of platform studies and creates more academic insights on this understudied subset of platforms and their place in the digital age. Secondly, by studying this particular Big Tech alternative, this thesis critically addresses De Winkel's (2023) fringe platform paradigm within the field of platform studies. To do this, this thesis will utilize a platform analysis according to the CoC model of Van Dijck (2013), with the added alterations proposed by De Winkel (2023). Doing a platform analysis requires this thesis to do a critical discourse analysis, which I'll discuss in section 3.1, as well as an affordance analysis using Light et al.'s (2018) walkthrough method, which will be explained in further detail in section 3.2.

3.1. Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a way of analysing data in order to understand the deeper meaning behind what is being said. CDA aims to develop a way to analyse secondary layers within language (Fairclough, 2013). In other words, the method unravels a secondary layer within the text by analysing the hidden meaning behind a surface-level reading (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Therefore the aim of CDA is to denaturalize a text and discern different hidden discourses present within the text.

Operationalization

Since BLAST.tv is not overtly pushing away from Twitch, but rather mentioning how they want to add to the live streaming market, trying to understand the underlying discourse is important in analysing this platform. Thus by utilizing CDA, the dynamic between BLAST.tv and Twitch can be studied effectively. As shown in Table 1, this thesis will utilize the semiotic tools from Machin & Mayr's 2012 book *How to do critical discourse analysis? A multimodal introduction*. Additionally, the concept of self-positioning from De Winkel (2023) will be used as an additional discourse in order to effectively analyse the linguistic choices that BLAST makes and how it positions itself as a fringe platform.

The resulting discourses that are found can then be divided into the structures of business model and ownership, technology and governance, and fringe platforms. By combining the different concepts of Van Dijck (2013) and De Winkel (2023), a complete picture of BLAST.tv's position within the live streaming market can be created. Then, when the platform of

Table 1*List of discourses to be analysed*

Discourse	Definition
Self-positioning	The way BLAST.tv positions itself relative to its mainstream counterpart Twitch.
Lexical choices	The way in which BLAST positions its platform compared to its mainstream alternative Twitch.
Overlexicalization	There is an overrepresentation of certain concepts present within the texts about BLAST and its streaming platform.
Lexical absence	Certain terms normally present within the live streaming market are absent from the texts about BLAST.tv.

BLAST.tv is understood from this analytical level, and the relationship between this fringe platform and Twitch, its mainstream counterpart, can become evident.

Corpus

Firstly, the dataset will consist of the Terms of Use (ToU) of BLAST.tv platform. This webpage consists roughly of 4000 words. Secondly, this research will analyse the public filings of 2021 and 2022 from BLAST ApS, the company owning BLAST.tv. Since BLAST is based in Denmark, the company has to make its filings publicly available through Denmark's Central Business Register (CVR). Additionally, from this database information regarding BLAST's ownership can also be gained because Danish companies also have to state their ownership in this Business register. Right now, the public filings up to 2022 are available to the public, however, BLAST's public filing of 2023 is reported to be released in late April or early May (Lee, 2024). Since the release window is inside the thesis trajectory this research will potentially add additional information from this report if the release date gives enough room for academic inquiry. These public filings are 40 pages long and consist of several financial records and statements about BLAST products. BLAST's ownership records are 25 pages long and consist

of in-depth records about owners, the type of shares they own, and the percentage of voting power that they have during the Annual General Meeting of shareholders.

Analytical Dimensions

By using CDA within platform studies and analysing the Public Filings and ownership records, this thesis will understand BLAST's business and ownership model from an in-depth perspective. Additionally, by using the concept of self-positioning, a better understanding of how BLAST positions itself in relation to Twitch from a fringe platform perspective. As a result, this thesis can use the discourses found within these texts as a basis for answering the main research question on the relationship between BLAST.tv and Twitch, but it also allows answering the sub-question of whether BLAST.tv can be considered a fringe platform in the first place.

Additionally, using discourse analysis on BLAST's ToU, this thesis can understand the dimension of Governance of Van Dijck's CoC model. The dimension of Governance helps researchers understand how a platform self-regulates. By knowing how a platform does this, one can start to recognize a potential pattern of what the social norms of a platform are (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 50).

3.2. Walkthrough Method

The walkthrough method is an analytical methodology that can be used as a way to analyse and engage with apps to understand how their technological mechanisms shape the app's culture and by extension how that shapes the user experience (Light et al., 2018, p. 882). The method, which is grounded in Actor-Network theory, emphasizes how different technological decisions within an app, shape the cultural implications for its users (Light et al., 2018, p. 886). The method's main strength is its ability to identify how the different elements within the app can shape an app's expected use. The concept of expected use is defined as a way to describe the app's overall "vision, operating model, and modes of governance" (Light et al., 2018, p. 883).

Now, while apps and platforms are not necessarily the exact same research object. With the convergence of how people use their digital devices, platforms and apps are more alike than people tend to initially think. Light et al. (2018, p. 887) even acknowledge that apps and platforms resemble each other because of the controlled nature of the users of these digital spaces. Therefore, the walkthrough method is still suitable for a platform that does not have a designated app for it.

Operationalization

This thesis will use Light et al.'s (2018) walkthrough method in order to understand BLAST.tv technological experience. The walkthrough method is a systematic way of gathering data for platforms. The method used creates three distinct phases within this data-gathering process and uses four concepts to be a reliable method. In Table 2, the four concepts and their definitions are further explained.

The first phase is Registration and entry. The most important aspect of this phase is the way the platform initially guides the user when they first enter the platform. Light et al. (2018) argue that within this phase, it is made clear by the platform what the intended use of itself is. Also, this is the stage where BLAST's ToU will be mentioned and whether the new user wants to accept these terms that relate to the governance dimension.

The second phase is everyday use. Here the researcher will have to focus most of their attention on the different functionalities of the platform (Light et al., 2018, p. 893). During this phase, the researcher will be able to see what users are allowed or not allowed to access during everyday use. By mapping these aspects through the four concepts, the cultural aspects of a platform can be unearthed better since during this phase the researcher essentially does research in a similar way to how people do an ethnographic study. Historically, ethnography requires the researcher to completely immerse themselves within a certain cultural context (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024). By extension, Light et al.'s (2018) walkthrough method forces the researcher to engage with a platform on a deep level akin to that of an ethnography.

The last phase of the walkthrough method is app suspension, closure and leaving. During this phase, the researcher looks at how the platform lets users suspend their account (Light et al., 2018, p. 894). Suspending an account simply means that users are able to delete their account from the platform's database, essentially removing their existence from the platform. By studying how users can suspend their account, the walkthrough method is able to understand how a platform tries to sustain their user base (Light et al., 2018, p. 895). In the case of this thesis, using the walkthrough method helps to understand how BLAST.tv pushes new users to sign up, in what ways they try and keep them on the platform, and what they do to keep these users signed up for a longer period.

Table 2

List of concepts used within the walkthrough method framework

Concept	Definition
User interface arrangement	The way BLAST.tv guides users through activities via the placement of buttons and menus
Functions and features	Groups of arrangements that mandate or enable an activity, including pop up windows, compulsory fields and requests made by the platform to link with other user accounts
Textual content and tone	Texts embedded within the user interface, such as drop-down menus or the categories available and their discursive power to shape use. These are more than just instructions
Symbolic representation	A semiotic approach to examining the look and feel of the platform and its likely connotations and cultural associations with respect to the imagined user and ideal scenarios of use. This may involve considerations regarding branding, colour, and font choices

Note. This table is made using the concepts of Light et al.'s (2018) walkthrough method.

Corpus

Studying a platform through the walkthrough method means that the corpus consists of the BLAST.tv platform. For the purpose of this thesis, the walkthrough will be done within a private window of the Microsoft Edge browser. This method ensures that the walkthrough can be done in such a way that no existing trackers are diluting the data-gathering process. The walkthrough method is based on user-centred research and this method forces the researcher to analyse pivotal aspects of the research object (Light et al., 2018, p. 889). Thus in order to effectively study BLAST.tv as a platform I will take on the role of a new user who enters the website for the first time.

Analytical Dimensions

Through the use of the walkthrough method, this thesis is able to understand the technology dimension of Van Dijck's (2013) CoC model. As a result of looking at the technological architecture of the platform through the platform-specific elements, a clear comprehension of the platform's vision, operating model, and governance can be achieved effectively (Light et al., 2018, p. 889).

The clear-cut steps of the technical walkthrough will give a strong overview of the makeup of the platform. Thus it will help this thesis' understanding of how BLAST.tv's socioeconomic make-up shapes how a user can interact with the platform. Light et al. (2018, p. 891) have created four distinct concepts to use within the walkthrough method. These four aspects help give meaning to how the platform is technologically made up in terms of (1) registration and entry, (2) everyday use, and (3) suspension, closure and leaving. Using these three stages of the walkthrough method, BLAST.tv can be studied from the techno-cultural construct of technology.

3.3. Validity and Reliability

Two important aspects of this thesis that need to be adhered to in order to create credible research are validity and reliability (Brink, 1993). This means that careful considerations concerning ethics, limitations, and researcher bias are important to acknowledge when doing research (Brink, 1993, p. 35; Tracy, 2010, p. 84). The reliability of this thesis relies on the extent to which the methodology can be repeated by other scholars (Silverman, 2011, p. 361). Thus, the reliability of this research has been achieved using the semiotic tools from Machin and Mayr (2012) and utilizing purposive sampling that fits the research's goal of understanding the discourse created around BLAST.tv. Additionally, reliability is achieved with the comprehensive description of Light et al.'s (2018) walkthrough method and the extensive explanation of how it is applied to BLAST.tv. The validity of this thesis relates to the extent to which the concepts used during the research process are correctly measured. While there are different ways of achieving validity, it ultimately comes down to how strong the descriptions of different concepts are and how this research utilizes these concepts in relation to the research question (Tracy, 2010, p. 843). Furthermore, Brink (1993) acknowledges that the researcher's position within the study is one of the most important factors relating to the validity of the study. The research will use the coding process to reach validity through the constant comparative method (Silverman, 2011, p.

376). This means that while finding different discourses in the corpus, these will be compared with the theoretical framework of this study.

3.4. Research Ethics

When doing research, there are ethical considerations that need to be done. According to Tracy (2010), there are eight criteria that need to be considered when doing qualitative research: (1) worthy topic, (2) rich rigor, (3) sincerity, (4) credibility, (5) resonance, (6) significant contribution, (7) ethical procedure, and (8) meaningful coherence (Tracy, 2010, p. 840). While the goal of a worthy topic has been laid out already within the introduction and theoretical framework of this thesis, and the goal of rich rigor is achieved through careful construction of the methodology section, the most important aspects that still need to be addressed are the goals of sincerity, credibility, and ethical considerations.

Sincerity has to do with how open a researcher is about their position in the world regarding the object of study (Tracy, 2010, p. 842). For me personally, I have both a personal and academic interest in this topic. The type of live streams that people can watch on BLAST.tv are professional tournaments of a game that I am passionate about on a personal level. And thus by extension, this passion for the game not only means that I want to watch these tournaments through specific means but also that I am interested in studying the platform's place in larger society. Tracy (2010) emphasizes the importance of being transparent about the researcher's position since it gives insight into certain decision-making processes. For this thesis, the reason why BLAST.tv is being studied in the first place, is because I feel connected to the research object on a personal level. However, through a theoretical framework and a clear methodology, this research can also be placed within the larger academic field of platform studies without a personal bias impeding the research results.

Another aspect of qualitative research that is important, is its credibility. The aim of having credible research is for readers of this text to understand the results and acknowledge that these results are worked out effectively (Tracy, 2010, p. 843). According to Tracy (2010) this is achieved through writing thick descriptions about the various concepts being studied. This thesis achieves its credibility by writing down clearly which concepts are being used for which dimensions of Van Dijck's (2013) CoC model, and what the aspects of Light et al.'s (2018) walkthrough method are.

The last aspect of Tracy's (2010) eight criteria that connects with this thesis, are the ethical decisions that might have to be made. Within this criterion, there are procedural ethics,

situational ethics, relational ethics, and exiting ethics. However, none of these four sub-criteria create concerns for this thesis. Since the corpus of this thesis consists only of secondary data that is published with the consent of the object of research, ethical problems based on these four ethical lenses do not show up. Ethics also concerns itself with the well-being of individuals or their relationship with the researcher (Tracy, 2010, p. 847). Since the material used for this thesis consists entirely of texts gained from public information regarding BLAST as a business, the publicly available ToU for users of the platform, and a comprehensive walkthrough of a free online platform, there are no ethical complications when looking at the research object for this thesis in particular.

4. Analysis

Within this section, theory and practice comes together. Throughout this section, an in-depth analysis on the findings will be done. The way this section is divided up is similar to how José van Dijck analyses the platform in *Culture of Connectivity*. Thus, in section 4.1. the topic will be the ownership and business model of BLAST. After that, in section 4.2. the governance of the BLAST.tv platform will be looked at from an analytical point of view. In section 4.3., with the help of Light et al.'s (2018) walkthrough method, BLAST.tv as from a technological perspective will be dissected. These sections will then be able to answer the question of whether BLAST.tv is a fringe platform and what their respective relationship is with Twitch.

4.1. BLAST Through the Lens of Ownership and Business Model

Ownership Models

When looking at the ownership and business model of a platform, many adapted throughout their existence from non-profit user-centric to more for-profit and owner-centric (Van Dijck, 2013). BLAST as a company is also in this process. According to CVR, the Danish Central Business Repository, the company was founded in 2016 and has slowly grown over the last ten years into a Class C business in Danish accounting, meaning that they have the legal necessity of publicly filing their taxes as a Danish company. This classification means that BLAST cannot be seen as a small startup, but rather as a small business with some capital backing.

However, even though the company is not a start-up in name, most of its revenue still comes from outside investors, such as *Kapitalen ApS* and *Heartcore Capital Fund* in Denmark. These investors gain an ownership and voting share percentage in return for investing in BLAST. Van Dijck (2013) mentions how studying a platform's ownership helps to understand who ultimately controls the social processes present on the platform. As for BLAST specifically, it means that five companies own all the shares of the company. All these companies own at least 10 per cent of the company's shares, in either class A, class B, or class A and B shares. These different types of shares represent different levels of voting power. Most of the time, class A shares are considered to be the standard type of stock in companies (Maverick, 2024). However, when a company wants to concentrate voting power towards specific shareholders, class B shares can be created that hold less voting power compared to class A stocks (Maverick, 2024). This means that companies with the same percentage of shares could have differing power within the company because of the different types of shares that they hold.

During the Annual General Meeting (AGM) all the shareholders of a company then have the ability to hear about the financial situation and long-term strategy of the company (Chen, 2024). Additionally, shareholders can vote on several issues such as “appointments to the company's board of directors, executive compensation, dividend payments, and the selection of auditors.” (Chen, 2024). In the case of BLAST, the largest owner, *Kapitalen ApS*, has the most influence on the direction of the company, since they own 25 - 33.33% of the company and have class B shares. Also, one of the more interesting owners of BLAST is the *Danmarks Eksport- og Investeringsfond*. This company owns 10 – 14.99% of BLAST and owns class A shares. This investment fund is set up by the Danish state to invest in companies that it deems will help create value for the country of Denmark on a global scale, according to the investment fund's website. As a result of this investment, the Danish state indirectly has voting power within BLAST. However, as mentioned before, *Danmarks Eksport- og Investeringsfond* only owns class A shares meaning that their voting power will be less strong compared to that of the other private investment funds owning shares in BLAST ApS.

This means that BLAST as a company, will have to operate on a scale that is a lot smaller compared to Twitch. Whereas Twitch is wholly owned by Amazon, BLAST is currently operating at a loss, while continuously needing to do rounds of funding (Maas, 2023). This means that eventually, BLAST will have to become financially healthy in order to appease these shareholders.

Business Model

Most tech platforms generate the largest amount of their revenue through advertising on the platform (De Winkel, 2023, p. 70). Similar to the fringe platform Gab, BLAST.tv also mentions that they offer an ad-free experience when watching Counter-Strike. However, this point is more nuanced than it might seem initially. While live streaming BLAST uses burned-in advertising for their own platform as a way to push people towards their platform, as is seen in Figure 1. This promise of “no ads” does not completely hold up in the most literal sense. I will further explain this when discussing BLAST's technological affordances, but when a newcomer enters the site, they are being shown ads on the side of the website and in a small box in the top right corner of the platform from the Google Ads platform.

Now, running a platform requires the business to generate revenue to become financially stable in the long haul. BLAST does not offer any premium subscriptions on its platform, like the GabPro subscription that De Winkel (2023) mentions in their work. As a result, BLAST heavily

Figure 1

Sentence Two of the Burned-in Blast.tv Ad



Note. This figure is taken from a recording of BLAST premier on YouTube from 27 January 2024

relies on partnerships. Van Dijck (2013) already mentions in their book that large platform owners were moving towards partnerships with other companies outside of the platform space and BLAST also does this. Traditionally, mainstream platforms agree to partner up with companies by connecting each other's services with each other (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 49). Most of these partnerships connect user databases between platforms, giving both owners a larger user database to gain information about (Van Dijck, 2013). BLAST's partnerships are different, however. These partnerships are more like partnerships people can find between a sports network and another company. For example, the company recently announced that its Spring Final will be presented by the fintech company Revolut (Blast.tv, 2024). These types of partnerships are more like sponsorships that can be found at sporting events. This shift in how BLAST partners up with other businesses pushes the boundaries of what it means to be a live streaming platform. Instead of relying on connecting its platform with other businesses like the

Big tech platforms do, BLAST tries to find companies that want to affiliate themselves with the BLAST.tv and BLAST premier brands.

Another way that BLAST gains income apart from the partnerships and previously mentioned rounds of funding, is from ticket sales from events that they run. This might sound counterintuitive when talking about a live streaming platform, however as mentioned earlier in the thesis, BLAST originally was a company that ran Counter-Strike tournaments in various places around the world. With the popularity of that game, these tournaments would finish with playoffs in large venues that people can go to and watch the games live. These ticket sales also add up as one of the revenue sources of the company, although it is unclear what the specific division of revenue is for BLAST as a company since the only point mentioned on their balance sheet is “revenue”. Obfuscating to the public how much different revenue streams generate helps the company create a stronger case for itself once it is profitable. The company will have to elaborate less to their investors during the AGM of the company. BLAST is also able to move money around more effectively this way. In their 2022 public filing, the company mentions how “capital expenditure investments” were being made for the BLAST.tv platform, meaning that the company used money from outside of the company to cover costs for the creation of the platform. Additionally, the company can simply mention that management at the company can constantly value the different products within BLAST’s portfolio. These examples show that BLAST is able to prop itself up to look more financially stable than it in actuality is.

These different ways that BLAST generates income compared to Big Tech platforms show how the company tries to diversify its business model. It’s a very different strategy from traditional platforms where most of their income comes from displaying ads (De Winkel, 2023, 70). However, being an ad-free alternative to Twitch does not necessarily mean that this is a long-term and sustainable business model. As mentioned in the section about ownership, while the company is not publicly traded, it is owned by investors who got their shares through investment rounds. This means that it is up to these investors to decide when they want to increase BLAST’s revenue. BLAST ApS has never been profitable up until 2022, and with the larger economic difficulties, it begs the question of whether the company can keep operating at a loss, while not embracing the ad market. Interestingly though, the decision to start showing ads or not influences whether BLAST.tv can be considered a fringe platform in the future. If the company decides not to show ads on the platform, it shows the ideological difference between themselves and Twitch. However, if BLAST.tv does start showing ads during broadcasts, it signals that the company might just be a small business that is evolving its business model to a

more economically sustainable future. Nonetheless, it is hard to disregard the fact that the business model of BLAST fails to make the company profitable right now. Losing cash as a business almost always means that the business will go bankrupt at some point. Therefore, BLAST will have to think about how it can increase revenue, while also retaining its core message of an ad-free experience. Perhaps, the company will eventually have to rely on a crowdsourcing model, akin to that of the fringe platform Gab (De Winkel, 2023, p. 102). Or perhaps the company will fold and agree to the market standard and will start displaying ads during their live streams.

4.2. BLAST Through the Lens of Governance

A platform has the power over its users in terms of how their users should behave on the platform through an End-User License Agreement (EULA) or Terms of Service (ToS) (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 50). BLAST.tv has a dedicated page for their ToS, Privacy Policy, and Community Guidelines and has opted for the term Terms of Use (ToU) for their platform. BLAST does not have a larger parent company that dictates how it governs its users, and all data that BLAST gathers on its site will therefore be processed by the company itself. However, even though there is no larger corporation forcing changes to BLAST's ToU, the company does mention sharing data with 878 partners to process user data. With many other companies having access to user data, the question arises of who the owners of all these partners are. Since BLAST itself is owned by several investment funds, these investment companies could intertwine their investments with each other by sharing user data between different small companies that they own.

Additionally, while BLAST is based in Denmark, the Terms of Use mentions that users have to adhere to English law and that English courts hold jurisdiction over the users of the platform. To add to that, the data that BLAST gathers from its users are collected through Google Analytics, with the resulting data also being processed in the United States. Here, BLAST disperses its governance structure into three countries so the company can navigate the digital space more effectively since there is a lack of legislation surrounding the governance of a platform (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 51). This strategy is different to that of the fringe platform Gab, which based itself in the United States and relied on the freedom of speech value present in US public discourse to set itself apart from Big Tech platforms (De Winkel, 2023, p. 88). Instead, BLAST.tv relies on its small scale to govern its platform based on a small set of rules that it can adjust based on legislation from different countries. The platform is able to do this through the overlexicalization, in combination with technical and social protocols, of various sections within

its ToU. De Winkel (2023) mentions that platforms generally opt for a reactive way of governing their users. Whether BLAST governs in this way during broadcasts is unclear since the live streaming functionality is only available during game tournaments.

However, when analysing the ToU, BLAST.tv also seems to follow this ad hoc governance structure that can be found on Big Tech platforms. De Winkel (2023) divides a ToU into three distinct clusters that get users banned when they break these guidelines. (1) trying to get the platform to malfunction, (2) making toxic behaviour a bannable offense, (3) breaking any laws in the country that the platform operates in. These three clusters can also be seen within BLAST's ToU. However, there is a distinct lack of repercussions mentioned for users in the ToU. Within the text, BLAST forces its users to give up control of any user contributions made on the platform, with the owner being entitled to "remove, restrict, suspend or alter any user account" when BLAST deems it unfit for its platform. The types of contributions that this falls under are hateful conduct or harassment, with examples of racism, sexism, homophobia, and bullying being named as examples. These social protocols signal that BLAST.tv wants to create a platform that is safe for advertising. Since the company partly relies on sponsorships with other companies for its revenue, creating vertical integration between ads and content follows the path that other platforms like YouTube have followed (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 147). However, this lack of clarity in what specific type of behaviour is not allowed on the platform also indicates that the owner holds a significant amount of power over their users. From the perspective of Political Economy, BLAST.tv is in a tight balancing act between policing its users and the forces of potential sponsorship deals, an example of the power struggles that show up when studying a platform based on this theory (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 37). If the platform fails in this, it could mean that either sponsorships or users leave, a negative result for the company in both situations.

This power relationship between owner and user is further illustrated when examining the rights that users do get on the platform. BLAST.tv mentions that it adheres to GDPR laws and that it lets users request a copy of their data, demand that their personal data is not being processed for marketing or other business operations, and ask for the deletion of any data that the company has over a user. On top of that, most of the user data from BLAST.tv is stored in the UK or European Economic Area. The explicit mention of these rules show that, even though a platform can regulate its users on several aspects of the platform, they still need to adhere to general jurisdiction if they want to operate within a market (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 37). Additionally, BLAST.tv explicitly states that they are allowed to keep user data for two years after account termination, also an indication that the company is not allowed to store data for an extended

period of time. This is the influence that governments have on businesses and shows how Political Economy helps to uncover that there is a power struggle between the user, owner, and the state (Veseth & Balaam, 2024). For BLAST.tv it indicates that even though the platform can hold a lot of power over users on what people do on the platform, the company eventually has to adhere to strict legislation from governments of major markets.

4.3. BLAST Through the Lens of Technological Affordances

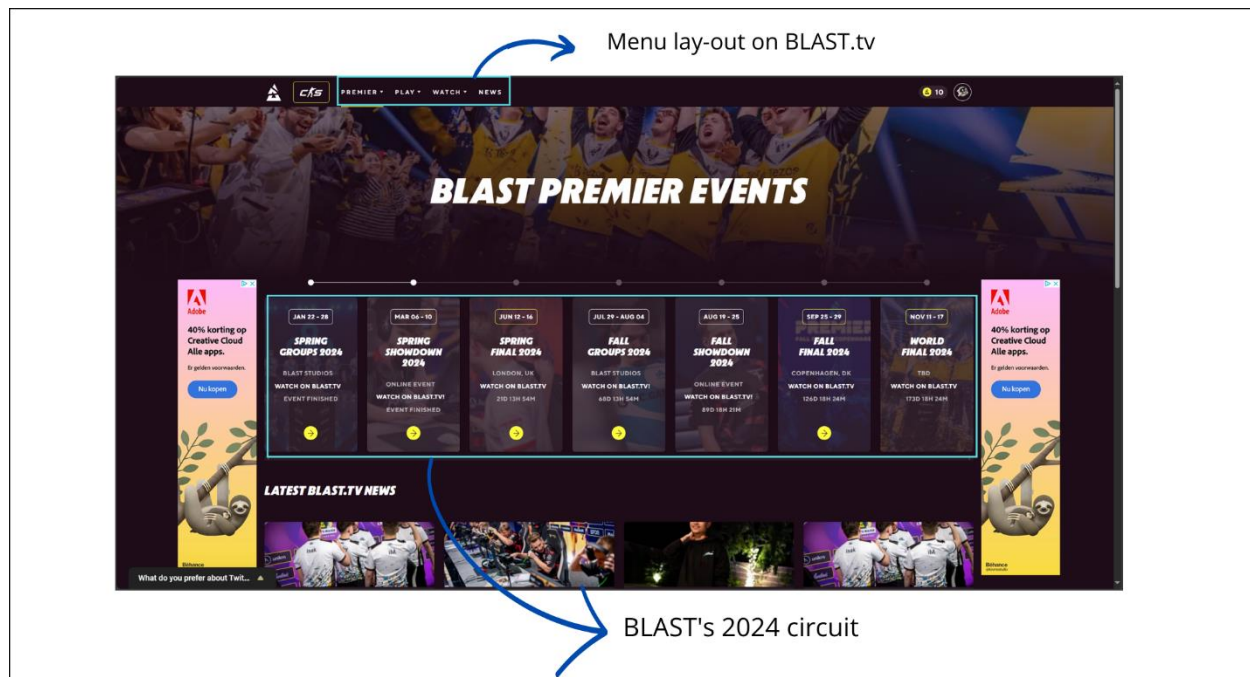
BLAST.tv deviates away from the classic affordances of Twitch quickly when entering the platform. This is not very surprising while doing a platform analysis on BLAST.tv. The platform's main purpose is to be a live streaming service specifically for their Counter-Strike, and as of the beginning of May, for Dota 2 professional gaming tournaments. As a result, the platform has nothing to offer to its users when there are no tournaments to watch. BLAST alleviates this problem by diversifying its affordances. Instead of just focusing on creating a simple alternative to Twitch as a live streaming service, BLAST is also a news hub, a database for professional teams and their players, a place where users can view exclusive videos and a gaming hub. This means that the platform seems to be trying to become a hub for esports enthusiasts instead of only a live streaming platform. Something that they also mentioned in their 2022 public filings.

A Hub for Following Esports

Outside of a "live" tab that appears when tournaments are broadcasted on the platform, BLAST.tv created a section of their platform dedicated to their events. The "premier" tab is the leftmost option for users to hover over, and should therefore be considered as the most important subsection of the platform. BLAST is a Western company, which means that most users entering the platform will read from left to right. Having premier be the leftmost option shows that, even though there are not always tournaments being live streamed, BLAST still believes that the tournaments are the company's most valuable asset to show on the platform. The tournament circuit of BLAST Premier is where several teams compete over the course of a year for millions of dollars, all culminating in a global final with the best teams of that year for a large prize pool. As seen in Figure 2, the "BLAST Premier" section on the platform gives users information about these different events; which teams compete, which teams won and lost, who will go to the seasonal finals, and users can vote for who they believe was the Most Valuable Player (MVP) of a specific tournament. These extra features relating to BLAST's other products show the fundamental symbiotic nature of how these products interact with each other on this platform. Viewers on Twitch will not have access to this information when viewing BLAST events

Figure 2

The Blast Premier Circuit Overview on Blast.tv



Note. This figure is from the researcher's walkthrough of BLAST.tv

and this means that during everyday use, BLAST.tv offers its users additional information about the tournament that people can watch. Essentially, BLAST is trying to create a platform that is less of a live streaming platform like Twitch, and more something akin to a more modern version of ESPN and Sky Sports. These platforms offer its users a more comprehensive experience of the broadcasts. Profiles, statistics, and news about specific teams can all be found on the websites of ESPN and Sky Sports. Just like how all these things can be found on BLAST.tv about the different teams participating in BLAST Premier events.

Another way that BLAST.tv is more like a sports enthusiast platform than a live streaming platform, is with the addition of team profiles for users to take a look at on the platform. Although it seems that BLAST does not place heavy emphasis on these it is still a way that the platform differentiates itself from competitors. Light et al. (2018) mention how the placing of certain pages influences the way people consume media on a platform. Since the team statistics page can only be found by first going to a specific tournament and then by

clicking on a team, it signals that BLAST does not want to display this feature as a major selling point even though it could be a reason to switch platforms for users. Additionally, it is an example of how a platform can shape the way users can use the features on a platform (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 38). In this instance, it means that users will have to know about some of the elements buried deep within the platform's features, even if they potentially would like for that element to have a more prevalent place during their experience.

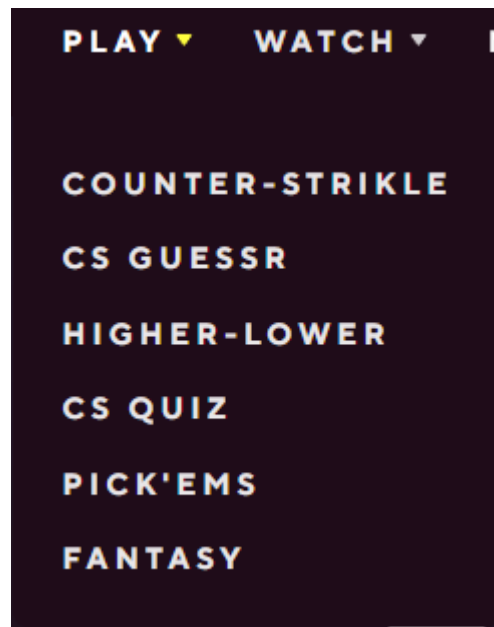
This dedicated esports hub is on BLAST.tv shows that the platform tries to compete with Twitch by operating within an existing niche on a Big Tech platform. Potentially, this could mean that BLAST can compete with Twitch on a longer timescale compared to other fringe platforms because BLAST does not take an antagonistic stance towards Twitch. When De Winkel (2023) describes Gab's relationship with Twitter (now X) as a relationship where the alienation of users on the Big Tech platform, results in the growth in users on the fringe platform. BLAST.tv on the other hand, tries to pull people in, instead of being a place for people that are pushed away from Twitch.

A Hub for Playing Games

Another way that BLAST tries to keep users engaged on the platform between tournaments, is by also becoming a hub for games related to the esports that BLAST broadcasts. However, Fantasy and Pick'ems are only available while a BLAST tournament is running because these games need a tournament being played for them to work. This means that the platform would lose users when there is no tournament that keeps users engaged. BLAST fixes this issue by offering small games that can be played on their website without the need for a tournament. As seen in figure 3, these four games appear above the Pick'ems and fantasy games on the platform indicating that these four games are more important compared to the games that users can play sporadically. These are, in order of the drop-down menu, "Counter-Strikle", "CS Guessr", "Higher-Lower", and "CS Quiz". All these games require the users to have a certain level of knowledge of Counter-Strike. For example, Counter-Strikle is a game that is similar to the game wordle from The New York Times. However, with the version on BLAST.tv, users have to guess professional players. Similarly, CS Guessr tests the user's ability to recognize certain locations inside the maps of Counter-Strike that people play on, akin to how with Geo Guessr people have to find out where they are in the world. These examples of using already-established online games lower the barrier of entry for new users and can help BLAST.tv retain users.

Figure 3

The Dropdown Menu of the Play Category on Blast.tv



Note. This figure is from the researcher's walkthrough of BLAST.tv

However, even though there is a low barrier of entry, there is no way to engage with other users who play the games on BLAST.tv. The platform offers no way of viewing other users' profiles and the results from these games have to be shown outside of BLAST.tv. The company tries to achieve this by showing a bright yellow share button after completing a game. Although this does help with the shareability of these BLAST.tv games, it also shows that BLAST.tv depends on Big Tech platforms and their reach for the growth of the platform (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 17). This dependency on Big Tech services is something that other fringe platforms also struggle with. In the case of Gab, for example, the platform had to work on partnerships with other radical free speech platforms because the company got cut off from using Big Tech services adjacent to their platforms (De Winkel, 2023, p. 107). These two cases show the difficulty of completely cutting a platform off from the influence of its Big Tech rivals. BLAST's decision to embrace this aspect of Big Tech indicates that the company does not hold an ideological opposition to how these platforms are governed. Instead, the company tries to utilize the size of these platforms to lure in new users who want to try the different games that the platform offers.

This dedicated games hub does not compete with Twitch directly. However, by offering its users the ability to play games, BLAST.tv creates a deeper connection between users and the platform. Instead of a parasocial relationship between the user and specific producers, BLAST gamifies its platform to build a sense of connection between the platform and the user. This bridges the gap between, the idea that video game fans like to consume media surrounding their favourite games (Wohn & Freeman, 2020, p. 84). For BLAST.tv it could potentially mean that users hold a deeper connection to the platform, resulting in a longer staying time on the platform.

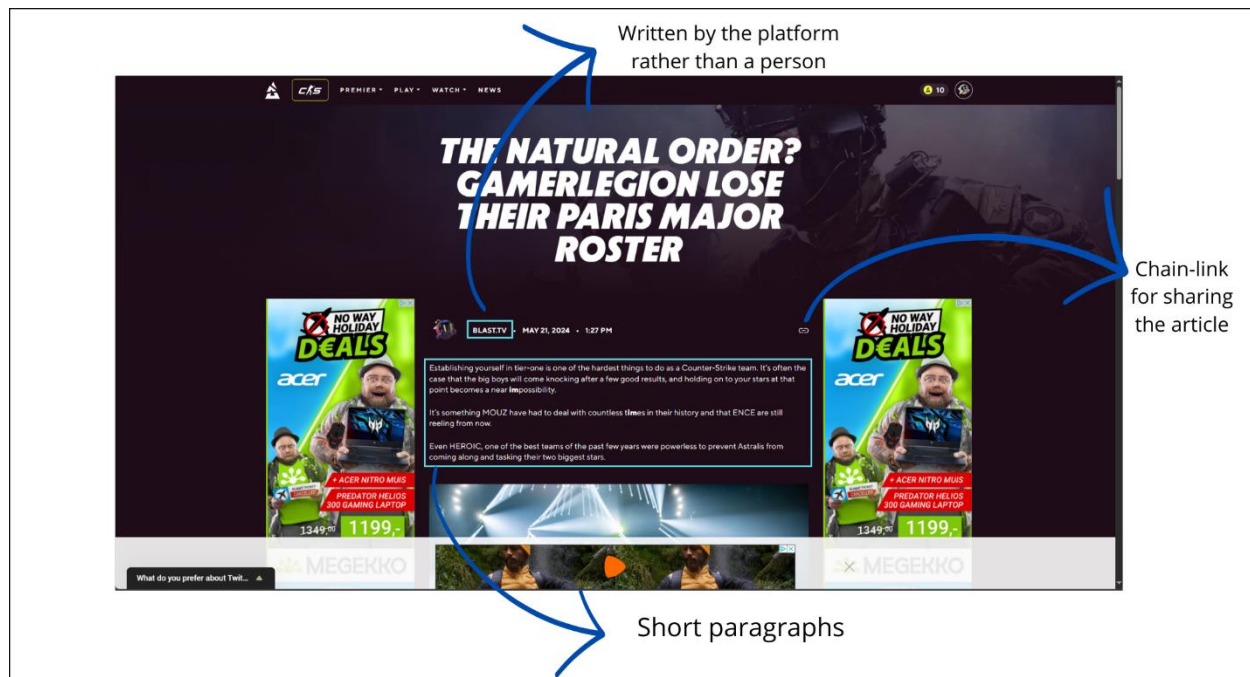
A News and Curated Content Hub

The last way that BLAST.tv sets itself apart from Twitch is through its dedicated news and content sections on the platform. Since BLAST is not the only company that holds professional tournaments for Counter-Strike, there are periods when BLAST.tv naturally loses interest from users. To alleviate this problem, the company writes up articles about different aspects relating to Counter-Strike such as news stories about the game or professional scene and opinion pieces on the state of the game. These diverse news items show that BLAST tries to increase its cultural production and thus tries to shift its place in the market away from only being a live streaming platform. Nieborg and Poell (2018) mention that for Big Tech platforms, content producers are a disposable aspect of their business model. Because the ecosystems are open by nature, it means that other producers can quickly jump into the hole that other producers left open. BLAST takes a different approach to this. Since BLAST produces all content on the platform in-house, it shows that the company pushes against the notion that UGC is a cornerstone of the business model for platforms. Instead, BLAST tries to create professionally produced content of high quality for its users in every facet of its business.

But what makes this news section so noteworthy, are the elements of who wrote the article and how users are able to share the article. Figure 4 gives an example of an analysis article about a Counter-Strike team. While the tone in the text is a very standard analysis, the writer is the most interesting aspect of this piece of content. Every article on the website is simply written by “BLAST.tv” without acknowledging any specific person. This is different from traditional sports hubs, where the writers of articles are mentioned at the top of the article. By not mentioning any writers, BLAST.tv essentially creates a faceless news hub. As a result, the company disregards existing journalistic norms of declaring the author of a piece. BLAST establishes that on these multipurpose sports platforms, the owner curates every aspect of the content that is being produced. And this is not the only way that BLAST differentiates its content

Figure 4

An Example of What a News Article on What Blast.tv Looks like



Note. This figure is from the researcher's walkthrough of BLAST.tv

hub. The platform also lacks integrated share buttons for other social media platforms. This example indicates that BLAST does have some elements fitting it within the fringe platform framework. De Winkel (2023) mentions how a fringe platform takes on the mainstream platform by stretching what can be considered the norm within its market. Additionally, a lack of interconnectedness with mainstream platforms, indicates that BLAST.tv wants to sever itself somewhat from Big Tech platforms.

The dedicated content hub on BLAST.tv creates additional reasons for users to keep going to the platform outside of tournament days. By writing about current news stories, BLAST can keep traffic to their platform at a good level because the content that they create is part of the current zeitgeist. Additionally, Van Dijck (2013) argues that professionally made content is considered to be polished and thus builds a further distinction between BLAST.tv and Twitch and its UGC. Therefore, creating a content hub benefits BLAST in two ways. First, it helps to

differentiate the small platform from its Big Tech rival. And secondly, it builds general credibility for the platform.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

This thesis set out to answer a main research question and a related sub-question about BLAST.tv. The first question that needed to be answered was whether BLAST.tv could be considered a fringe platform according to the framework of De Winkel (2023). Secondly, the relationship between BLAST.tv and Twitch was studied through the question: *How does the microsystem of BLAST.tv navigate the relationship with a bigger livestream platform as a fringe platform?* Within the following section, the two research questions will be answered, followed by what these findings mean for the platform studies field in general, and ending with a section about the limitations of this thesis and places where research can go in the future.

5.1. Answering the Research Questions

What Kind of Platform is BLAST.tv?

Within the field of platform studies, understanding how different dimensions are connected is just as important as understanding these elements separately. As a new platform, BLAST is constantly evolving. Even just within the span of this thesis trajectory, BLAST announced that they will start to host Dota 2 tournaments from 2025 onwards and that all of those will also be broadcast live on BLAST.tv. This means that the company seems serious about expanding the reach of BLAST.tv to other esports titles. This rapid evolution of the platform gives it an edge over Big Tech alternatives since BLAST can quickly shift aspects of its platform around. However, even though the platform is able to make changes quickly right now, further growth of the platform might turn it into a platform that adapts to changes just as slow as its Big Tech counterparts.

Right now, BLAST.tv is still operating on the fringes of the live streaming market. The platform pushes the boundaries of what can be considered as live streaming content. Instead of placing UGC at the centre of the platform, BLAST produces its own high-quality content for its platform. This shows that the live streaming market does not have to rely on UGC for its content creation. Thus, by changing the cultural production on the platform, BLAST.tv changes the socioeconomic structures of its platform. Instead of mainly relying on ad revenue, BLAST opts to generate revenue through direct partnerships with other brands. And since these partnerships are built into the platform organically because of the symbiotic nature of these sponsors, BLAST.tv circumvents some of the problems that Van Dijck (2013) mentions about users and tolerating a certain level of commercial activity. On BLAST.tv, part of the platform gets branded with a sponsor, or whole tournaments gain a naming sponsor. With these types of partnerships,

BLAST.tv users are accepting built-in commercial activity over display advertisements on the platform. Additionally, this is an example of how BLAST.tv takes an implicit antagonistic stance towards the governance ecology of live streaming platforms. De Winkel (2023) mentions that an antagonistic position is key to understanding how a fringe platform operates in relation to its mainstream alternative. Since BLAST.tv explicitly promotes its ad-free platform, it is safe to assume that it believes that an ad-centric business model is something that can be changed within the live streaming platform.

This alternative approach to generating revenue helps BLAST.tv stand out from its Big Tech alternative. To add to this, by operating within a niche of the live streaming market, BLAST can build a distinctly different product from traditional live streaming platforms. But even though it operates within this niche, BLAST.tv does not fit the fringe platform framework perfectly. BLAST aims to create the best place for esports fans to watch professional tournaments of their favourite games. Twitch on the other hand tries to create a service where users can live stream any aspect of their lives. This ideological difference within the dimensions of technology and content would mean that BLAST.tv should be labelled as a fringe platform (De Winkel, 2023, p.35). Additionally, the dimensions of ownership and business model in Van Dijck's (2013) CoC model also show clear differences between BLAST.tv and Twitch. Even though BLAST.tv does use Google Analytics to show ads, but this is only a small part of the company's revenue model.

However, when analysing BLAST.tv through the lens of technological affordances and how the platform self-positions itself towards Twitch, the platform does not fit De Winkel's (2023) framework perfectly. Based on my analysis, BLAST.tv diversifies its affordances away from being a platform only for live streaming. Rather, the small platform seems to be trying to become an esports platform where users can engage with their favourite game in a plethora of ways. This distinction creates the question of whether BLAST.tv can even be considered a fringe platform in the first place. The platform does challenge the idea that live streaming platforms have to utilize UGC as a business model, explicitly mentions in their ToU that the platform is a safe space for everyone, and challenges the industry standard of online advertising by creating a platform funded through existing partnerships with the company BLAST. These are three of De Winkel's (2023) characteristics that a fringe platform needs in order to be considered one. However, the fourth characteristic is interesting to look at. A fringe platform "can never be the hegemonic or dominant platform for a specific service" (De Winkel, 2023, p. 34). When looking at the technological affordances, BLAST distinguishes itself from Twitch by only offering professionally produced content. This means that BLAST.tv is pushing the boundaries of what is

a live streaming platform since none of the established live streaming platform affordances apply to BLAST.tv (Sjöblom et al., 2019, p. 15). While this could mean that BLAST.tv is a fringe platform, the complete lack of live streaming features on the platform outside of the professional tournaments held by BLAST makes it difficult to say whether BLAST.tv can even be considered a live streaming platform in the first place.

Thus, these distinctions mean that BLAST.tv operates within a completely different market compared to Twitch. If BLAST.tv is operating in a completely different market from a Big Tech platform it cannot be considered a fringe platform within that market. Additionally, even though there are some antagonistic tendencies between BLAST.tv and Twitch, these stances are implicitly made and could also be a way for BLAST.tv to simply create a better product compared to Twitch. Therefore it can be assumed that BLAST wants to break free from the market dominance of Twitch. Since fringe platforms have to operate on the periphery of a market and take an antagonistic stance towards mainstream platforms, a new question has to be asked: What type of platform starts with an ideological difference from a Big Tech platform, but ultimately starts operating adjacent to the Big Tech platform? BLAST.tv cannot be considered a fringe platform since the way that it operates as a microsystem is fundamentally different from that of Twitch. However, BLAST.tv is also not a mainstream platform within a different market since its size is simply not large enough to be considered mainstream.

What is BLAST's Relationship With Twitch?

The relationship between a Big Tech platform and a non-Big Tech platform should be studied because it helps further the academic debate in understanding how these digital spaces shape society from a cultural and economic perspective. Thus answering the question of *how does the microsystem of BLAST.tv navigate the relationship with a bigger livestream platform as a fringe platform* explains how a small platform can operate within a market that is converging towards a single Big Tech platform. Since BLAST.tv cannot be considered a fringe live streaming platform due to the distinct differences between it and a traditional live streaming platform, one might immediately disregard any relationship between BLAST.tv and Twitch. However, its relationship with Twitch still adds to the academic field of platform studies. Prior academic research focused on platforms that completely operate within the same market. The case of BLAST.tv and Twitch shows whether Van Dijck's (2013) CoC model and De Winkel's (2023) fringe platform framework can be applied to platforms that operate partially within the same market.

The relationship between BLAST and Twitch becomes clearer when considering that BLAST tries to pull people towards their own platform during their live streams on Twitch. During these live streams, BLAST initially pulls people in by offering an ad-free viewing experience for its users, but the company has crafted a platform that offers its users additional reasons for choosing BLAST.tv over Twitch. The non-Big Tech platform adds three technological affordances for following esports tournaments, playing games, and the consumption of extra content surrounding certain video games. These three hubs form the foundation for a platform that offers users a different experience compared to Twitch. Whereas on the Big Tech platform, users can constantly swap channels to find their next favourite personality on the platform, BLAST.tv offers a hub for esports fans to come back to regularly and find information about the game and teams that they connect with on a personal level. However, as mentioned before, even though BLAST advertises its platform as an ad-free alternative and a platform made for watching Counter-Strike specifically, most of BLAST's viewership is on Twitch rather than BLAST.tv. This means that for BLAST.tv to survive long-term, the platform will have to keep siphoning users away from Twitch and keep them engaged on BLAST.tv. Interestingly enough, this reliance on a Big Tech alternative is another strong indication that BLAST.tv is a fringe platform even though the platforms themselves are significantly different.

Yet, while BLAST relies on pulling users away from Twitch, the Big Tech platform does not seem to acknowledge BLAST.tv as a threat to their operations. Big Tech companies hold a major amount of power, not only on their specific platforms but also on the surrounding infrastructure of the larger internet (De Winkel, 2023, p. 109). By this logic, if BLAST.tv would be considered a serious threat to the existence of Twitch, the Big Tech platform would simply restrict the advertising of BLAST.tv on Twitch. This would seriously impede the ability of BLAST to grow its platform. On top of that, BLAST's reliance on Twitch is even evident when entering BLAST.tv as a new user. The company even explicitly asks what a new user prefers about Twitch over BLAST.tv. Here BLAST implicitly acknowledges that right now, users consider Twitch as the superior product over BLAST.tv. In other words, BLAST advertises its platform while live streaming on their Big Tech rival and asks new users about the reasons why they would prefer Twitch over BLAST.tv. Meanwhile, Twitch accepts this type of advertising on its platform and does not acknowledge the existence of BLAST.tv in any official way. This shows the one-sided relationship between these two platforms and that small platforms depend on GAFAM in order to survive (De Winkel, 2023, p. 109). As for BLAST.tv, it is evident that to grow as a platform, BLAST will have to reliably pull users away from Twitch during their broadcasts.

This current relationship between BLAST.tv and Twitch will probably evolve though. BLAST ApS is owned by several investment funds and will have to create a sustainable business model for the company and make a return on these investments. It is therefore important that BLAST.tv keeps growing in some capacity. How? That remains unclear. The platform seems to want to expand towards a broader audience with the introduction of Dota 2 on the platform. Additionally, the company owns the exclusive productions and broadcasting rights for other games that do not have any presence on BLAST.tv yet such as Rocket League, Rainbow Six: Siege, and Fortnite. BLAST could potentially diversify its platform for a more general esports audience rather than the singular market of Counter-Strike fans. This would change how BLAST.tv should be perceived as a platform. Right now, the platform is just a place where Counter-Strike fans can engage with a game that they play while not actively playing the game themselves. If BLAST is able to integrate these different games, BLAST.tv could potentially turn into a platform with professionally produced live streams and other video game-adjacent content within the esports market.

So, while BLAST.tv currently has a one-sided relationship with their Big Tech alternative, future updates to the BLAST.tv platform could change this dynamic. If there is a large market for highly produced esports content, BLAST.tv could eat away at Twitch's market share in terms of esports viewership. Although just as Van Dijck (2013) aptly noticed in *Culture of Connectivity*, these Big Tech platforms have become so large in scale that they have become inescapable in nature. Something a small platform from a Danish company could probably not change as well.

5.2. Theoretical Implications

Van Dijck's (2013) CoC model studies a platform from a socio-economic, as well as, a techno-cultural perspective. However, one aspect that the CoC model lacks is its applicability for fringe platforms. De Winkel (2023) changed parts of the CoC model to make it more applicable for platforms that are formed based on an ideological difference from a Big Tech platform. This antagonistic stance towards the mainstream platform and its governance of the larger ecology shapes the way that these non-Big Tech platforms operate within their market. However, BLAST does not take this antagonistic stance explicitly. Rather, it depends on the fact that Twitch does not see BLAST.tv as a threat to their market dominance. Additionally, many of the affordances present on Twitch do not apply to BLAST.tv. With its reliance on professionally made content on specific video games instead of general UGC, BLAST.tv operates within a niche of Twitch's business model. Due to these reasons, BLAST.tv cannot be considered a fringe platform. However, its one-sided reliance on Twitch also means that categorizing it as a mainstream

platform would not fit the CoC and fringe platform models either. Therefore, this case of BLAST.tv shows that within the field of platform studies, more academic research will need to be done in order to understand the position of non-Big Tech platforms within their larger platform market. More specifically, more research needs to be done on small platforms that are not fringe but do have a one-sided relationship that depends on the goodwill of their respective Big Tech platform.

Another implication from this research shows that there is a potential market for professionally made broadcasts in an online space in the digital era. TV stations and their high production value content have seen users slowly move away from its curated content. Instead, users move towards consuming UGC and media that is always on-demand (Spilker et al., 2020, p. 606). Because TV gives viewers few options to actively engage with the content that they watch, live streaming platforms created a market where users are able to engage directly with the content that is being produced (Sjöblom et al., 2019, p. 23). BLAST.tv further iterates on this trend by focusing purely on content that is of high production value on their platform. By doing this, BLAST can curate the experience for its users, while being an attractive advertising channel for traditional businesses. Meanwhile, users are still able to directly engage with other users and their favourite games during live streams. This way BLAST.tv further evolves the live streaming market and creates a potential new area for research. Instead of platforms relying on consumers and producers, a company can be a TV station that also gives users the ability to engage directly with the broadcast.

The last aspect of this thesis that broadens the academic field of platform studies has to do with the live streaming market itself. José van Dijck in *Culture of Connectivity* showed the broad applicability of their model by studying several social media platforms with diverse use cases. However, since 2013 the platform landscape has changed. Van Dijck (2013) analysed YouTube as part of the initial list of platforms. However, YouTube is a Video-on-Demand platform and not a live streaming platform. By adding another type of platform that was not part of Van Dijck's initial analysis, this thesis broadens the applicability of the CoC model. Additionally, by analysing a small platform De Winkel's (2023) framework on fringe platforms could also be tested within this new market. Based on my analysis, the CoC model and fringe platforms offer an adequate starting point within the academic field of platform studies. However, a more diverse categorisation will need to be constructed to be able to place small platforms like BLAST.tv that do not fit into the fringe or Big Tech platform framework.

5.3. Limitations and Further Research

In terms of limitations, this thesis failed to analyse BLAST.tv through the dimensions of users and content. This is due to the time frame of this thesis project. BLAST only broadcasts tournaments during specific timeframes within the calendar year, which means that studying users and content can only be done during those periods. During the thesis trajectory, no BLAST tournaments were broadcasted before June 12th, which is too late into the timeline of this project for it to be added to the thesis corpus and be analysed effectively. Future research can try and study BLAST's users and content dimensions within the timeframe of a single tournament or study the different affordances between viewers of the different games on BLAST.tv once Dota 2 tournaments are being broadcasted on the platform as well.

There was also a limitation regarding Light et al.'s (2018) walkthrough method. Since this method is based on ethnography, the walkthrough method relies on the notion that a researcher takes the position of a new user when doing the method. In this thesis, I already mentioned my connection to the research topic within this thesis' research ethics section. However, to reiterate, my personal interest in the topic made it so that I already knew about, and have even used, BLAST.tv before the start of this thesis. Therefore, researcher bias could have crept into the walkthrough of BLAST.tv and could have altered some of the subsequent results and analysis. Future research should do a walkthrough method on BLAST.tv with a new user and find whether the results from this thesis are significantly different from a completely new user on the platform.

Another limitation of this research stems from the fact that BLAST.tv is a small platform to begin with. Their size limits the level of public knowledge available about the platform. Consequently, fringe platforms are studied less in academics because not a lot of people know about their existence. The fact that BLAST only launched in late 2022 added to the difficulty of creating a strong theoretical framework for the platform, since this meant that there was a lack of academic research and also little archived information from credible news sources available. To add to this, the platform is still in rapid development since its inception and will probably keep developing until a threshold is reached. These developments on a platform show that, while it is just as important to study small and fast-evolving platforms, it is difficult to know when it is the right time to start researching these small platforms. On the one hand, it might be better to let a small platform grow for a few years for the platform to mature, like BLAST.tv. However, that could result in the platform being shut down, like what happened with De Winkel's (2023) case of Gab. Future research should therefore not shy away from revisiting a platform analysis of BLAST.tv since the platform could be drastically changed in a couple of years.

Another angle where future research could go is to do more platform analysis on live streaming platforms. Currently, there is a lack of research being done on live streaming platforms. While scholars like Sjöblom examine the dimensions of users, content, and technology, a comprehensive understanding of live streaming platforms as microsystems is lacking within the platform studies field. By extension, this also means that there is not a lot of literature on how live streaming platforms operate outside of their microsystem and thus how they interact with other platforms on the internet. As a result, doing a complete platform analysis on Twitch could create a strong foundation for more insight into the workings of live streaming platforms and their market. Additionally, future research should find other fringe platforms in the live streaming market that can add to the understanding of fringe platforms and their relationships with their Big Tech alternatives.

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