

# Politics, Gaming Culture, and Content Moderation on Twitch

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## SUMMARY

Both politicians and video game streamers are not strangers to being targeted by online hate and harassment. Concerned about the risk that an outpouring of public hate could result when these two groups appear together online, ADL's Center for Technology and Society (CTS) reviewed four high-profile livestreaming events occurring between October 2020 and February 2021 on the social media

platform Twitch. The goal was to determine why or why not these events had devolved into hotbeds of bigotry and harassment, as many might assume would be the case. However, our investigation found that—despite the potential for hate and harassment in events co-hosted by prominent politicians such as Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Democrat of New York, and popular video game streamers such as HasanAbi and Pokimane—the events we reviewed were primarily positive and inclusive. After collecting and analyzing the data in the chat at each Twitch event, we arrived at this conclusion, looking at the most common expressions and the number of times that certain potentially hateful phrases, images, or conspiracy theories appeared.

We then analyzed why these four events were positive and inclusive while at other times, public figures, including those involved here, are so often subjected to outpourings of hate on the same and other social media platforms. We found that certain aspects of Twitch, when used effectively, can make its spaces more resilient against harassment than other platforms. For example, text messages in Twitch chat are ephemeral—they cannot be engaged with individually like content on platforms like Facebook, where options to like and reply to specific comments appear even on comments in livestreaming video. Other factors appear to be the extensive and customizable suite of tools Twitch provides to community moderators to address hate. However, this suite is not consistent across Twitch as the problems that plagued a recent Twitch event hosted by comedian Jimmy Fallon on April 6 shows. And even platform announcement events hosted by Twitch itself have turned into spaces full of hate and harassment.

Why the difference among different events on Twitch when it comes to hateful and harassing commenting? Comparing Ocasio-Cortez's events and Fallon's event, we found that the central difference in moderation hinged on the number of experienced community moderators involved in keeping the stream positive during the events. Experienced community moderators understand how to navigate Twitch culture and calibrate moderation tools to ensure that Twitch events stay respectful and inclusive.

One significant lesson is that politicians and public figures interested in engaging with Twitch should connect with experienced community moderators and researchers familiar with the platform to create positive spaces for discussion and political engagement. We also recommend that Twitch require public figures to engage experienced community moderators before hosting events, and the company dedicates additional resources, training, and compensation to ensure a robust pipeline of skilled and experienced community moderators help make the platform a more welcoming space for all people.

## RESULTS

### Introduction

Founded as a part of Justin.TV in 2007, Twitch rebranded in 2011 to become a standalone platform for live streaming video game content. This content consists of a person—the streamer—who appears on screen, often in the corner, while broadcasting footage of themselves playing a video game.

Amazon acquired Twitch in 2014, and its steady growth continued. According to reports, Twitch has grown from 55 million active users in 2015 to [140 million monthly active users as of 2021](#). In 2020, Twitch’s popularity exploded due to the COVID-19 lockdowns and fueled by a large influx of content other than video games. Viewership of non-gaming content related to music and the performing arts [quadrupled from 2019 to 2020](#), while viewership of Twitch’s “Just Chatting” section of conversational video streams more than doubled in the same period.

The first attempt at a Twitch-specific streaming event with politicians took place in 2018 and 2019 when *The Washington Post* [hosted a series of events](#) featuring journalists playing video games with politicians and discussing political issues. The series was not widely popular despite episodes featuring high-profile national politicians such as Senator Cory Booker, Democrat of New Jersey, and Representative Matt Gaetz, Republican of Florida. None of these streams [received more than 3,000 views](#).

More recent political events on Twitch, pioneered by Representative Ocasio-Cortez (a [gamer herself](#)), have proven far more popular, reaching millions of viewers. The Center for Technology and Society collected data from the following Twitch events between October 2020 and January 2021:

- On October 21, 2020, Ocasio-Cortez and her invited guests, Representative Ilhan Omar, Democrat of Minnesota, and video game streamers Pokimane, HasanAbi, DrLupo, Hbombguy, as well as others gathered for a get-out-the-vote event. They played the video game *Among Us* (generating 225,771 comments on one channel).
- On November 28, 2020, Ocasio-Cortez and Canadian Member of Parliament Jagmeet Singh, leader of the New Democratic Party, joined video game streamers HasanAbi, Contrapoints, xQc, and others, playing *Among Us* to raise money for COVID-19 relief efforts (generating 283,762 comments across two channels).
- On December 22, 2020, Georgia Democratic candidates for the U.S. Senate, Reverend Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff, played the card game *Uno* with video game streamers from Georgia in an event focused on engaging young voters for the 2021 runoff elections (generating 6,233 comments on one channel).
- A January 28, 2021 event with Ocasio-Cortez, streamer TheStockGuy, Reddit co-founder Alexis Ohanian, and economic policy analyst Alexis Goldstein discussed Reddit communities' involvement in the GameStop investment controversy (generating 125,796 comments on one channel).

To compare the experiences viewers had concerning these political events and those that marked other Twitch events, CTS also collected the data from the April 6, 2021, event hosted by comedian Jimmy Fallon to raise money for the charity Feeding America. Fallon played the video game *Among Us* alongside the drummer Questlove and other members of the band The Roots, *Among Us* community manager Victoria Tran, cast members from the popular show *Stranger Things*, and

video game streamers Sykkuno, Valkyrae and Corpse Husband (generating 74,242 comments on one channel).

### **Political Events, WallStreetBets, and Antisemitism**

Public online events featuring Ocasio-Cortez might be expected to attract an onslaught of hate and harassment. The high profile progressive member of Congress has [spoken openly](#) about the many death threats she receives via her Twitter account. Other elected officials and high-profile individuals have also faced outpourings of online harassment. Earlier this year, [malicious hackers disrupted](#) Senator Reverend Raphael Warnock's virtual Shabbat sermon in honor of Martin Luther King Jr. Video game streamers [Pokimane](#), [DrLupo](#), [HasanAbi](#) and others have been targeted by swatting, doxing, or death threats on Twitch and other platforms. [Studies have demonstrated](#) the many anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim attacks that Omar has faced on an ongoing basis on Twitter and Facebook. Senator Ossoff talked about a Facebook advertisement against him that [trafficked in classic antisemitic tropes](#).

More broadly, ADL's research has also highlighted the abuse targeting gamers, as well as politicians. A report from October 2020 [showed a deluge of online antisemitism directed toward incumbent Jewish candidates on Twitter](#) in advance of the 2020 U.S. presidential election. ADL's [annual survey of hate, harassment and positive social experiences in online games](#) for 2020 found 81% of adult gamers in the U.S. experience harassment in online games.

Given the reality of these experiences, it seemed likely that public events that featured both prominent politicians and video game streamers would become hotbeds of hate and harassment. But our investigation found that the four prominent political Twitch events we reviewed resulted in primarily positive and inclusive spaces.

For example, on January 28, Ocasio-Cortez hosted a Twitch event around the [controversy surrounding the game retailer GameStop](#) and the [subreddit](#)

[r/WallStreetBets](#), a community forum on Reddit whose members advocated the takedown of the hedge funds that shorted GameStop's stock. The event drew over 600,000 viewers. While ADL's investigators [noted some classic antisemitic](#) tropes associated with the GameStop incident on other platforms, the commentary was dominated by courteous and enthusiastic discussions related to the stock market at Ocasio-Cortez's event. Our analysis shows that of the 125,796 comments we tracked in the chat during the event, only 0.002%, or 30 comments, contained antisemitic slurs. They included derogatory use of "Jew" or "Jews", conspiracies related to [George Soros](#), and use of the ["echo" or triple parenthesis](#) symbol.

On the other hand, the most prevalent comments were the phrases "To the moon" and "hold the line," which made up 5,186 of 125,796 comments, roughly 4% of the commentary. Both of these phrases were from the WallStreetBets community on Reddit. "To the moon" means the value of a particular stock is on an upward trajectory, while "hold the line" encourages holding on to a stock regardless of its current price.

The results were similar when we analyzed the chat on another Ocasio-Cortez Twitch event, held last year on October 21, 2020, which had focused on encouraging viewers to vote in advance of the presidential election. The most prevalent comments were expressions of LGBTQ+ pride. They comprised 5,303 of the 225,771 comments in the chat, or 1.16% of all comments. The frequency of various insults or conspiracy theories regarding the politicians who appeared in the chat was very low. For example, the baseless conspiracy theory that Omar married her brother is only mentioned in the event chat 40 times among 225,771 comments, or 0.0001%. This is a stark contrast to Omar's experience on Twitter two years before: a [study](#) showed that roughly half of 90,000 tweets directed at the representative in 2018 contained anti-Muslim or anti-immigrant rhetoric.

### **What Might Make Twitch Different?**

While our study looks at only a small snapshot of events, its findings are striking and raise intriguing possibilities for mitigating online hate. One possible reason

that none of the political events CTS analyzed on Twitch was dominated by hate and harassment is the nature of the livestreaming Twitch chat as the dominant mode of communication on the platform. On a platform like Facebook or Twitter, the primary modes of communication are comments with unique URLs that exist in perpetuity unless deleted or hidden by the user or removed by the platform. Even on Facebook Live and Facebook gaming streams, users can choose to reply or like comments in the chat, providing avenues for targeting and amplifying hate and harassment. On Twitch, the dominant mode of communication is livestreaming chat comments. In Twitch chat, comments cannot be engaged with individually and flow from bottom to top, potentially mitigating the amplification of any individual comment. This result is especially evident during big events when many people populate the chat at a fast clip. Harassment and hate on Twitch requires a different level of effort by the user—if a user wants to disrupt the chat on a Twitch stream, they may have to repeat their hateful or harassing content many more times for it to be as visible as a similar comment on another platform.

Another reason these events stayed positive may be a consequence of the suite of tools that Twitch provides its community moderators. These include bots that [automatically moderate chats](#) and can be fine-tuned to provide greater control to moderators, and also provide the ability to delay the appearance of comments in the chat of a particular channel. Community moderators can decide how long the delay lasts and adjust it depending on the stream's size and the speed of incoming comments. That delay allows community moderators to adjust the flow of the chat to a comfortable level and address problematic comments in near-real time without being overwhelmed.

## AUTOMOD MODERATION CATEGORIES

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- **Discrimination**  
Race, religion, gender, etc. Hate speech falls under this category.
- **Sexual Content**  
Words or phrases referring to sexual acts and/or anatomy.
- **Hostility**  
Provocation and bullying.
- **Profanity**  
Expletives, curse words, and vulgarity. This filter especially helps those who wish to keep their community family-friendly.

## WHAT AUTOMOD CATCHES AT EACH LEVEL

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- **Level 0**  
No filtering.
- **Level 1**  
Some filtering on discrimination only.
- **Level 2**  
Some filtering on discrimination and sexual content, more filtering on hostility.
- **Level 3**  
More filtering on discrimination, sexual content and hostility.
- **Level 4**  
More filtering on discrimination, sexual content and profanity, and most filtering on hostility.

### *Settings on Twitch's "Automod" tool for community moderators*

The nature and centrality of chat and the availability of tools for moderation speak to what sets Twitch apart from other social media platforms, but do not account for how hate and harassment manifest in large amounts during some Twitch streams while being much less prevalent during others. Community members on the platform [have voiced concerns](#) about how poorly moderated some events on the official Twitch channel are, exposing tens of thousands of users to hate and harassment. CTS's analysis of comedian Jimmy Fallon's April event found that the most popular expression in the chat was the emote "TriHard", which was used 40,555 times in 2,541 comments in the chat, making up almost 4% of comments.

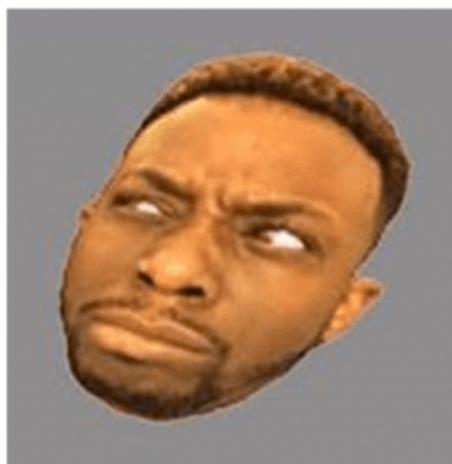
The overwhelming prevalence of the emote "TriHard" at Fallon's event speaks to the importance of experienced community moderators during a Twitch stream. An emote is an emoji or image that is unique to Twitch and can be used in a chat by viewers of a particular stream to express themselves. "TriHard", which shows

the excited face of the Twitch streamer Trihex, has been used in different ways on Twitch but one such use has been associated with racist harassment targeting Black gamers. Professional gamer Terrence Miller, for example, [was plagued by racist harassment on Twitch](#), including the TriHard emote, during a finals match in 2016. He discussed the incident within the context of diversity in gaming at [Twitch's annual conference](#) in 2016, where he was again targeted by racist harassment with the emote.

In 2019, political streamer HasanAbi discussed Bernie Sanders' 1985 trip to Nicaragua on his channel when viewers began to repeatedly post the "TriHard" emote into the chat, alongside the "CmonBruh" emote, which has also been used in [racist harassment on the platform](#). Subsequently, HasanAbi [banned viewers from using both emotes in his channel](#). TriHard was the [sixth most popular emote](#) on February 3, averaging 16 million uses on the platform every day during the first three days of the month.



*The emote "TriHard"*



*The emote "CmonBruh"*

The choice here is not simple. Although Trihex himself is aware of how his emote has been used in racist harassment, he [has opposed](#) banning the emote due to the power that would give to those who appropriate the emote for hateful ends. It also increases the representation of BIPOC people among Twitch emotes. Fortunately, experienced and skilled community moderators on Twitch understand how emotes and other facets of Twitch culture are being used in a particular chat and the context of specific events, and can contemporaneously address any abuse.

## **Why Are Experienced Community Moderators so Important?**

Content moderation on Twitch works at both the broader platform level and on individual channels. At the channel level, a streamer can set rules for their community beyond the broad platform rules. Users are also empowered to address content that goes against those rules. For popular streamers with millions of viewers, having a reliable team of community moderators is essential.

For Ocasio-Cortez's first Twitch stream in October 2020, the moderation team consisted of several automated bot moderators and 14 human moderators (a mix of Twitch employees, moderators for large gaming events, and smaller audience streamers engaged in both gaming and political content on Twitch). Members of this moderation team joined in subsequent events hosted by Ocasio-Cortez. By contrast, the moderation team at Fallon's first Twitch event earlier this month comprised three users that seemed to have been created specifically for the event. During the stream, users in the chat called out the lack of moderation explicitly; statements recognizing or lamenting the lack of moderation appeared 755 times in the chat, making up 1% of the total discussion during the event.

## Moderators

Aidenwallis

Anaphaze

Beteljuice

Bwittafilter

Cent

Dontbedumbplz

Eddric

Fossabot

Fr0gan

Kurosaki421

Louis6321

Nastynate\_\_

Physsss

Pisco95

Veerserif

## Broadcaster

Jimmyfallon

## Moderators

Tsjfmod1

Tsjfmod2

Tsjfmod3

*Chat moderators during Representative Ocasio-Cortez's October 2020 event vs. Jimmy Fallon's April 2021 event*

In addition to having a deep understanding of how to moderate large live events, community moderators such as the ones employed by Ocasio-Cortez had extensive knowledge of how to best use the tools the platform made available to them. It is important to note that the use of platform tools by experienced community moderators to make events on Twitch respectful and inclusive is not something that happens automatically. The political events analyzed here involved extensive work by community moderation teams making numerous context-driven decisions on how to moderate a channel both before and during an

event. The consequences of not undertaking this work are evident in the high levels of hate and harassment present in Fallon's stream.

The lack of experienced community moderators may limit the effectiveness of Twitch events in other ways: despite the star power present at Fallon's stream, it only [raised \\$17,000 of the \\$25,000 goal](#) it set to give to Feeding America. (Fallon agreed to cover the rest personally.) By contrast, Ocasio-Cortez's second Twitch event, with Canadian politician Jagmeet Singh, [raised over \\$200,000](#) for food and housing insecurity in the U.S.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The potential for politicians to interact with their supporters and constituents using Twitch is significant. Since her first stream last October, Ocasio-Cortez has amassed over a million followers on the platform. With the commitment of politicians, their staff, the Twitch community, and the Twitch platform, our analysis suggests there is reason to hope that events such as these will grow while remaining respectful and inclusive spaces for political engagement in these divisive times.

### For Politicians Using Twitch

- **Keep Informed on Platform Culture:** Politicians and their staff need to stay abreast of how Twitch culture and the meaning of various expressions can shift rapidly within months or even days to ensure their events are welcoming spaces for participants. One way for politicians and staff to engage would be to become users of Twitch themselves, finding streamers that appeal to them and observing how they run their channel. ADL has identified several pro-social streamers [in this post](#). Another way politicians and their staff can stay informed is by consulting researchers and journalists who are investigating and writing about the platform, including:
  - [T.L. Taylor](#)

- [Gabriela Richard](#)
- [Will Partin](#)
- [Kat Lo](#)
- [Nathan Grayson](#)
  
- **Collaborate with Platform Moderators:** As politicians think about engaging in Twitch events, they and their staff should collaborate with individuals experienced in content moderation on the platform. The politician's staff should provide information to moderators involved in an event on key issues that the official is likely to highlight and potential areas of concern. Moderation should involve the expertise of all parties involved. The politician's staff will have more knowledge of the specific issues politicians have faced during public appearances and can share them with community moderators, while experienced Twitch moderators will know more about how to address potential concerns during an event on the platform and can work with staffers to mitigate them.

## For Twitch

- **Follow Social Media Best Practices, Enforce Global Policies Consistently and at Scale, and Increase Transparency:** For Twitch to remain a platform for positive political engagement, Twitch must follow best practices set forth by researchers and civil society. First, it must enforce its newly released hate and harassment policies [consistently and at scale](#), meaning it holds all users to the same standards regardless of their status or any challenges Twitch may experience due to many users. As a way to be held accountable, Twitch should release a meaningful and comprehensive transparency report. Twitch released its [first transparency report](#) in March 2021, the last major public platform to publish such reports. The report did not include data about how specific communities are targeted by hate and harassment on its platform, a significant omission. Twitch should include this metric in the future to allow

the public to track its efforts to support vulnerable and marginalized communities.

- **Keep Moderation Resources and Training Commensurate with Platform Growth:** Twitch should increase resources devoted to content moderation as the company grows. It should publish a metric that speaks to the number of platform moderators and the number of community moderators on the platform, and how its investment in this area keeps pace with user growth. Twitch should encourage and develop training for moderators and streamers to protect themselves and their streams when moderating political events, learning from the effective moderation practices during the events mentioned in this report and consulting with community moderators about best practices.
- **Require Trained Moderators for New High-Profile Streamers:** Twitch should prioritize [people over profit](#) by requiring prominent public figures who organize streaming events on the platform to have experienced and skilled community moderators involved both before and during the streaming event. The platform should provide well-known public figures with experienced, skilled moderators as part of any white-glove service they may provide to such a figure, and should compensate the labor of the community moderators in keeping the stream respectful and inclusive.
- **Provide Access to Justice for Marginalized Streamers:** Twitch should take special care to provide effective [redress](#) for streamers targeted with hate and harassment who may not have the resources of more prominent streamers or public figures. This should take the form of specific ways to escalate reports of harassment to the platform and access to experienced community moderators to help establish the norms in marginalized streamers' channels. The new platform [Peer2Peer](#) live has created an important resource for Twitch to note streamers who should be provided with access to justice in this way.

NOTE: Researchers interested in obtaining these datasets for further study of how politics functions on Twitch can reach out to [cts@adl.org](mailto:cts@adl.org).

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