

The Controversy Surrounding U.S Army's Twitch Channel

If you have been somewhat present within the circles of gaming in the last few years, online streaming and dedicated followings of various livestream and video sharing platforms, you probably have noticed that streaming platforms do not have the best reputation. As the biggest livestream platform, Twitch is not falling behind. The various controversies of Twitch would take up about two proper articles and a half, and that would still only be scratching the surface. Thus, there really is no point trying to list them off, but any immoral action you can name has probably been done in a Twitch stream. Catfishing, animal abuse, sexual harassment, swatting... All of those and more happened, and were handled by Twitch irresponsibly and at an infuriatingly slow pace most of the time. As for more specific examples, Twitch streaming NSFW content from the channel of their former most popular streamer, or their at-the-time most popular streamer streaming from a public bathroom, or one of the more popular streams spitting vodka in her cat's mouth all make good ones.

In a similar vein to the above paragraph, if you have been somewhat present in the general vicinity of planet Earth in about the last three centuries or so, you might know that the U.S Army does not have a good reputation, at all. The tendency of the United States to declare war on anything that moves, so long as it benefits the Military-Industrial Complex regardless of morality is pretty bad PR by itself, but the actions of the Army itself are not to be underestimated either. There is the obvious list of war crimes, broken treaties, and various other immoral actions in times of war, but more relevant to our case are the various PR fails of the Army domestically. Infamously, when the U.S Army asked on twitter how serving in the Army had impacted people, they received a barrage of replies detailing the former soldiers' PTSD, depression, anxiety, financial troubles, physical injuries, as well as the responses of various family members and friends of those who died in combat. The post received over ten thousand replies and was widely seen as a failure of a thread for the Army.¹ Another ever-present issue is the recruitment tactics of the Army. It has been very frequently criticized for targeting impressionable, poor, high school kids, and the trend seems to continue in Twitch.

In addition to normal social media accounts, the U.S Army now also has a twitch account. The account operates under the name of U.S Army Esports and mostly streams realistic shooter games. The irony is palpable. Of course, with such an account, trouble was inescapable. People started asking about the Army's war crimes in the stream, which was met with them being banned. Eventually the phrase "war crime" was restricted entirely meaning no comment containing the phrase would be broadcast. Although this form of moderation would be normal for a regular streamer, a government affiliated organization might do best not to use it, some civil lawyers argued. A livestream by the Army counts as an open forum for debate according to them, and this form of moderation is a violation of the first amendment. "The Army and Navy can't constitutionally delete comments or ban people from

¹ <https://www.npr.org/2019/05/27/727254720/a-u-s-army-tweet-asking-how-has-serving-impacted-you-got-an-agonizing-response>

these Twitch channels simply for asking questions about issues they would rather not address,” said Katie Fallow, senior attorney at the Knight First Amendment Institute.²

Another event that offended many people was their “giveaway”. The Army Esports channel claimed they would be holding a giveaway for a Xbox Elite Series 2 controller. The link they provided however, led users to an army recruitment page with no further explanation. The Army later explained that they kept track of the users who clicked the link through URL tracking, but according to Twitch, this practice was not transparent enough, leading to the giveaway being canceled.³ The giveaway was criticized by the public for being a scammy attempt at trying to recruit young people into the Army.

In light of these proceedings of events, The U.S Army Esports stopped streaming for a while in order to “review their internal policies and procedures”.⁴ After a few weeks, the Army Esports team announced that they would be re-appearing on Twitch with a tweet. There were other heinous actions, after the return as well. In one instance the streamer for the Army Esports team saw no issue in pronouncing a very anti-Semitic username. A formal apology only came days later.⁵ The awkwardness between the viewers and the streams still continues with occasional hard questions and insults appearing in the chat. The new policy seems to be to ignore those kinds of comments, and to not make statements about any topic.

For now, the U.S Army Esports team continues to livestream on Twitch, though it is still seen as very controversial. It might be that another conflict between critics and streamers is unavoidable considering the reputation of the Army and Twitch. Still, we do not know if it will lead to a more grand conclusion or if it will go down in history as another of the U.S Army’s tactless and shameless actions. Yet, no matter the scale, this move has become a small-time PR nightmare for the Army.

² <https://www.theverge.com/2020/7/23/21335347/us-army-military-pauses-esports-twitch-streaming-war-crimes-criticism>

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jul/23/us-military-tactically-withdraws-from-game-streaming-site-twitch>

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/22/style/army-gamers-war-crimes-first-amendment.html>

⁵ <https://www.vice.com/en/article/bv839a/the-us-army-makes-an-awkward-return-to-twitch>