

Hasan Piker on the problem with YouTube debate culture

Last week, a pair of YouTube's most popular creators was set to spar in the marketplace of ideas in a debate over the government's simple, common sense advice to wear masks during a global pandemic to stop the persistent spread of COVID-19.

The spat grew from a series of videos between right-wing provocateur Steven Crowder and the host of the *H3 Podcast*, Ethan Klein, calling one another out for their purported bad takes on mask-wearing. In March, Crowder called out Klein for saying that "you shouldn't think about" what the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention tells you and just wear the mask, rather than criticizing the agency and its scientists.

Crowder, who is widely known as the face of the "change my mind" meme, has challenged people to debates in the past, including college students on campuses all across the country. Klein, known for his comedy skits and pop culture commentary, is admittedly not the best debater. So instead of debating Crowder himself, Klein looped in Sam Seder, popular leftist host of *The Majority Report*, as a surprise guest to take his place.

The "debate" immediately flamed out. Once Seder appeared on-screen, Crowder got squirrely, slinging insults, and ultimately ditching the entire debate. Soon after recording, both Crowder and Klein released the footage. Both believed to have won by "owning" the other so publicly.

The whole fiasco raised serious questions about debate culture online and how platforms like YouTube and Twitch are influencing politics at large. I asked Hasan Piker, a popular

Twitch commentator and former *Young Turks* broadcast journalist, to talk about it. Piker has been a vocal critic of debate culture without shying away from his channel's political clout. As he tells it, the "debate me" challenge is just a branding exercise – and it's one he's increasingly willing to skip.

This interview has been edited for clarity.

What was your initial reaction to the Steven Crowder and Sam Seder debate?

Personally, I think all of this is just bullshit. I've done debates on the internet, and it's just pseudo-intellectual wrestling. It's sport, and it's not productive. I think it can help start a lot of people down the road of deradicalization, but what I have to recognize is that it fosters a really toxic environment. People just want to beat their opponent, so they're not necessarily ideologically shifting anyone. Instead, the 20 percent of the audience that is maybe malleable gravitates toward whoever the top dog debater is. So it turns into team sports. It's not necessarily grounding your ideology in materialism, and instead, it's just basically repeating talking points from the new intellectual daddy or father figure that you appreciate or enjoy.

It's interesting you bring that up – the concept of team sports. When I watched the "debate" last week, my mind went straight to the Gore Vidal and Bill Buckley debates in the late '60s. It felt like a moment where culture was beginning to override ideas, largely due to television as the medium for political debate.

I'll tell you another thing that's ironic about the Vidal-Buckley debates. Those debates can be TLDR'd into one of them calling the other "queer" as a pejorative and then the other calls the other a "fascist." If we look at that as the peak of intellectual debates, even back then, ultimately, they can

still be reduced to the same shit-slinging operation. And you're right, it is all about culture and personal branding.

Thinking of the debate last week, how do you think YouTube as a medium influenced the discussion? Each person was recording and could shape the discussion by changing the camera angles, muting someone, or turning their volume down.

That's a really unique perspective. I obviously talked about that on stream, but I never thought of the broader implications of it or considered how one-sided that is. It plays into the uneven playing field of the argument. Those decisions to alter camera angles were a deliberate attempt by Steven Crowder to stop his audience from recognizing what had happened in an effort to silence and seize full control ... And that was done in an effort to make himself seem more defensible in the eyes of his audience.

The internet has revolutionized the way people get their information. But at the same time, do you think it allows creators to control the narrative and decide their own winner on their platforms?

These debates are rarely about ideas, but instead a personal branding project. That's probably why it hit so hard for Crowder to try and defend himself. Sorry, I'm simultaneously downloading *Mario Golf*. I'm going to be playing that later on stream.

It's okay.

It's probably dog shit. I hate golf. But it's whatever.

Oh, yeah. For Steven Crowder, who has built his entire branding about how he is an intellectual type, much like Ben Shapiro has built his brand around being a guy who does debates and defeats liberals in the marketplace of ideas – it hits different. That's why he had significantly more to lose. That's what was going on. That's why he had to take all the

actions he did, and that's why he kept dodging Sam.

Now I want to get into a conversation about why you do what you do. I know there are a lot of people my age who get their news online and through these streamers. How do you feel about that responsibility?

It's definitely something I think about a lot. I have a pretty stable moral grounding and worldview, and I try to do right by everyone and be as transparent as possible. I communicate that I do have biases just like everyone else. It's pretty obvious when you come in. I do criticize the Democratic Party quite frequently and the Republican Party even more frequently than that. But that doesn't mean I'm providing this purely neutral objective analysis. I think all the people who claim to be doing that are lying and benefiting from having the default position be neoliberal capitalism. If there's injustice and you're taking a neutral position in the face of injustice, you're siding with the oppressor. You're still not neutral. That's my take on it. That's why I do my commentary in the way that I do it.

I try my best as humanly possible to read up in the limited amount of time I have leading up to a stream to prepare for the stream itself. And on top of that, I'm actively trying to make sure that I'm not misinforming anyone. I also have a pretty solid checking mechanism. If you've been in chat long enough, you know that as much as people like to talk about safe spaces or an echo chamber that I've cultivated in my community, I am not averse to criticism. I thrive in it. I love it. I look for it.

Do you see streaming and YouTube becoming more popular with younger people looking for new pundits and news online?

Well, there's still going to be a need for journalists to make the news. I hope that never changes. I do worry that like – I'm an idiot. I'm an asshole. I don't want the entire news

media to be comprised of other idiot assholes like me. I know that what I do is basically supposed to be the reward after a career of doing journalism, and I get that. Op-eds are supposed to be rewards that you give to people who did 25 years out in like combat zones, for the most part sharking State Department propaganda and lying to them and stuff like that. Still, those people are putting in the work, and they finally get their comfortable office gig in *The New York Times* or another reputable place, and then that's it.

Now, what I do is a way to completely bypass that and even go beyond the office-gig economy, which is now turning into Substack and stuff like that. But if everyone wanted to do that, it would ruin everything. I still believe that journalists, like real journalists, should do real news, which I am not. I am not a real journalist. I'm not doing real news. I'm a commentator. I hope that never goes away. That would be devastating.

The people that you're interacting with on Twitch in chat, you're accountable to them. They might unsubscribe. What's that relationship like?

For the degenerate dumbasses that are op-ed writers and commentators like myself, what I do is absolutely a million times harder. I will say this with my chest: what I do, it looks like I'm sitting in a living room and shooting the shit, it is very easy. I'm not going to a fucking coal mine. But in comparison to what Bret Stephens and Bari Weiss do, what I do is a million times more difficult if you are so used to being in an ivory tower where you get very little criticism. All you need to do is just shut it off. Like your comments under your *New York Times* article are not going to drastically redefine your op-ed piece.

My entire content revolves around constant back-and-forth communication, and it's a very different layer of trying to control that. But I love that. I think that's a good thing. As

far as the take economy goes, I think what I do is pretty solid. I think it's a good thing to have endless amounts of feedback from virtually every single person who wishes to do so, which is why I don't have a sub-only feed. Some communities, when they grow to my size, the streamer will shut down their chat to subscriber-only. I don't do that on purpose because I want to have these sorts of conversations with people, and I don't want the money to prevent them from happening.

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