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## **Twittering on: Audience research and participation using Twitter**

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### **Abstract**

This paper aims to explore the potential of social network site Twitter as a site for audience research. Drawing on notions of 'liveness', participation, convergence and interactivity, it argues that Twitter provides a potentially significant development in our understanding of audiences and their relationship with media, both 'old' and 'new'. The study looks at examples of Twitter users engaging with (and in some cases creating) the news and discussing television programmes. The author's own experiences of using Twitter in audience research provide a case study suggesting possible directions for future research using this medium.

**Keywords:** audience, audiences, new media, television, Twitter, social networking, convergence, participation, interactivity, liveness, news.

### **Introduction**

Twitter, the social network site in which users communicate via 'tweets' or messages of 140 characters or less has become an increasingly visible part of our media landscape. The service offers an interesting example of the convergence between 'old' and 'new' media and between 'producers' and 'consumers' (Jenkins, 2006a). The aim of this paper is to explore the medium's potential for our understanding of media audiences, their relationships to media products and the relationships between media audiences and those involved in producing the media. Mainly focussing on the UK, it will look at how Twitter users engage with, and in some cases create, the news; how they discuss and interact with television programmes and, drawing on my own research into Twitter discussions about Channel 4 documentary series *Revelations* (2009), how media scholars can utilise the medium in our own research.

Theoretically, I will be drawing on discussions of 'participatory culture' and 'interactivity' (see Jenkins, 2006b, Couldry, Livingstone and Markham, 2009), 'media events' (Dayan and Katz, 1992) and 'liveness' (Bourdon, 2000, Couldry 2003/2004, Roscoe, 2004). As a Twitter user myself, I am fascinated by the way that relationships between media 'producers', celebrities and other public figures, 'audiences' and 'texts' operate on the service, and, the way Twitter, along with other social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube, offers us a new way of researching and understanding these relationships.

As with all discussions of media, we cannot escape issues of power and control, and whilst Twitter appears to be a relatively democratising space, the presence of many official 'corporate' accounts and the development of 'promoted Tweets'<sup>1</sup> may yet change the dynamics of the environment and call into question issues of ethics, power and control, as has already happened with sites such as Facebook, MySpace and YouTube (Baym, 2010b). As Jenkins says, 'It would be naïve to assume that powerful conglomerates will not protect their own interests as they enter this new media marketplace, but at the same time, audiences are gaining greater power and autonomy as they enter into the new knowledge culture' (Jenkins, 2002: 80-81). Whilst there is not scope to tackle these issues within the space of these paper, they are nevertheless important to consider in future work on the medium.

Within this paper, however, we will see that power relations are nevertheless important in the way that celebrity 'opinion leaders' (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955) and 'official' accounts from media organisations have influence within the 'Twittersphere'. The service may present itself as an open, democratic environment where everyone can speak, but it would be naïve to argue that just because the technology affords the same access to Stephen Fry and Lady Gaga as it does to you and I, that means all users share the same level of influence and power within the environment – this is clearly not the case.

### **How Twitter works**

Although founded in 2006, it was during 2008 and 2009 that Twitter rose to prominence. Its adoption by high profile public figures, particularly in the US, UK and Australia, led to its user-base dramatically increasing and many academics, political figures, businesses and media organisations seeking to utilise and understand the power and potential of this platform.

Often described as a 'micro-blogging' website, Twitter has more recently been called 'real-time social networking', a discursive shift in emphasis that highlights it as a 'rolling news' platform rather than a static 'blogging' environment. Twitter CEO Dick Costolo himself argues that "Micro-blogging" isn't an accurate term for Twitter. "It misses the impact of Twitter' (Love, 2011), whilst Gruzd, Wellman and Takhteyev argue that Twitter 'exaggerates "presentism"...

a continued imagined consciousness of a shared temporal dimension' (forthcoming, 9). The introduction of services such as Google Real Time in 2010 which 'lets you see up-to-the-second social updates, news articles and blog posts about hot topics around the world' (Google, 2010), but in practice mostly posts updates from Twitter, also highlights this shift - which is something we will return to when we explore the way audiences tweet along with live broadcasts later.

Twitter can be used from the homepage, <http://www.twitter.com>, but there are also applications for computers and mobile phones that many prefer to use to access the service, as they enable functions such as sorting contacts into categories, and posting from multiple accounts at the same time<sup>2</sup>. Twitter is a simple service, where users communicate through short messages, or tweets, limited to 140 characters, like a text (SMS) message. Until November 2009, the service posed the question, 'what are you doing', but many users ignored this question and posted messages that acted more as conversation or observation (see Mischaud, 2007) and the question was changed to 'what's happening?' to reflect the way people were using the service (Stone, 2009), which, for many users is 'as a broadcast medium, marketing channel, diary, social platform, and news source' (Marwick and boyd, 2010: 9).

Users choose to 'follow' people and some choose only to follow those they know personally, whilst others choose to follow celebrities and public figures, news alerts, businesses or simply people they think look interesting. Users can also follow particular topics by searching for and following messages containing keywords. The style and content of tweets varies from simple link sharing or retweeting with little to no commentary, to one-to-one conversation, to talk between a small number of users engaging in direct address (direct address happens through the use of @username in tweets), but the most common tweets take the form of one to many conversation. This may be through short statements in the manner of 'status updates', through questions to one's followers, or through the use of hashtags, indicating that a user's comment or question is designed to be part of a wider discussion on a topic. Users may or may not receive responses to their statements or questions, and the responses they receive may be directed at them individually or recirculated as part of the one to many discourse by placing the username of the recipient in the centre of a tweet rather than at the start.

When users tweet something people believe to be worth reiterating or recirculating, the message may be forwarded, or 'retweeted' by their followers preceded by the letters RT and sometimes an additional comment. (See boyd et al, 2010). The process of retweeting, or RTing, helps messages or links circulate quickly and provides affirmation and recognition for the original sender, as well as giving them and their tweets a level of status – tweets that are

recirculated a number of times are labelled 'top tweet' by Twitter and appear high in the search feeds for a particular term within that tweet.

The Twitter homepage shows a list of the top ten 'trending topics' referenced most often, and these update constantly. Trending topics change according to the time in different countries and how much of the Twitter population is online from those countries. In January 2010, the service gave users the option to select 'local' trends from particular countries and continents as well as seeing 'worldwide' trends although this is problematic due to many users not specifying a country in their location, and the number of users whose location still says Tehran, following a movement for people to change their location during the Iranian elections in 2009 (Musil, 2009).

In order for topics to 'trend', a keyword has to be included in the tweet somewhere, often through the use of a hashtag, signified by using the hash symbol next to the label used (for example #Twitter). These tags enable users to categorise their message even if the content does not contain the keyword. Monitoring hashtags and keywords is one way in which we can monitor usage of Twitter, and, along with looking at 'trending topics' is the method I have concentrated on throughout this paper, but we could also analyse Twitter in terms of the interactions between specific users, or the way particular users (for our purposes, this could be a celebrity, or the account of a television show or newspaper) tweet and interact with followers.

### **Tweeting the news: Twitter and current affairs**

One of the ways Twitter came to public attention was through its role in shaping the news agenda. Current affairs and news stories are frequently debated through the service, and because of its global reach and instant nature, messages and links can be circulated to millions of users within a matter of minutes.

The use of Twitter during the Iranian elections in 2009 to spread information about what was occurring in the country brought the service's potential to help circulate and debate news to prominence (Grossman, 2009). Indeed, Iran, Tehran and #iranelection were among the top 21 trending topics of the year. (Chowdhury, 2009).

Twitter users in the UK made headlines worldwide in summer 2009, when the tag #welovethenhs topped the trending topics for several days. The tag was created in response to criticism of the NHS by some US Republicans campaigning against Barack Obama's proposed health reforms (Clark, 2009). User [@Glinner](#), aka Graham Linehan, writer of Channel 4 sitcoms *Father Ted* and *The IT Crowd*, alerted his followers to the things that were

being said about the NHS and implored them to post messages of support using the hashtag #welovethenhs:

- Ooh, these rightwing wackjobs in the US lying about the NHS really gets my goat. The NHS isn't perfect, but it's better than the US system!
- Please retweet all your NHS love using the hashtag #welovetheNHS

With over 50,000 followers, Linehan is one of the most popular British users of the service, and often tweets about current affairs, media and politics. He also sent messages to other popular British celebrity users Stephen Fry and Jonathan Ross in order to encourage them to get the topic trending (See Jacobson, 2009a).

In some ways, Linehan and other prominent celebrity users act as Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) opinion leaders, alerting the wider 'public' to particular news stories and links of interest, which are often then recirculated widely between Twitter users<sup>3</sup> - indeed circulating links to other sites, news stories, videos and blog posts is as much a part of Twitter as users sharing their opinions and experiences – it functions as a 'hub' between other media forms and texts as well as between users.

Within hours, thousands of British users had taken up Linehan's call and were posting messages of support for the NHS using #welovethenhs and over the next few days, hundreds of thousands of messages were posted to the service, forcing it to crash on more than one occasion, and keeping #welovethenhs at the top of the trending topics while Brits were online for much of that week (Land 2009, Barkham 2009). Monitoring the Twitter feeds for the #welovethenhs hashtag, you could witness people sharing stories of their positive experiences of the health service, but this hashtag was also used for debate and discussion. Many Americans (and people from other countries) posted messages with this tag, some agreeing with the British user base, some vehemently disagreeing, others debating different healthcare options. At the same time, several Brits were questioning whether we really do love the NHS.

Prominent British political figures quickly picked up on the trend, with the leaders of all three major British political parties speaking up on behalf of the health service, and Sarah Brown (the wife of the then Prime Minister) and the official Number 10 Downing Street account both posted messages of support:

- [#welovetheNHS](#) - more than words can say (Sarah Brown)

- “The NHS often makes the difference between pain and comfort, despair and hope, life and death. Thanks for always being there.” (Number 10 Downing Street account, attributed to British PM Gordon Brown)

The Labour website even set up a page called [welovethenhs](#), utilising the popularity of the campaign (from users of a variety of political persuasions) for their own purposes.

In March 2009, the *Scottish Sunday Express* published an article by Paula Murray on the survivors of the Dunblane massacre as they turned eighteen. The article described the teenagers' drinking, sexuality and swearing as being a disgrace to the memory of their deceased classmates. As with the NHS story, Linehan was instrumental in alerting the Twitter population to the article. Through blogs, tweets and Facebook groups, the public was quickly mobilised, and within the space of a few days, over 10,000 people had signed a petition against the *Express* story (Luft, 2009) and the PCC had received several complaints, which were later upheld.

In October 2009, #Trafigura became a key trending topic and made the news headlines, referring to the silencing of *The Guardian* newspaper from reporting discussion in parliament about the company's oil-dumping practices - the rapid circulation of messages about this on Twitter ensured the story made the headlines in several media outlets (Booth, 2009, Merrett, 2009, Moore, 2009).

A few days after the Trafigura story, the British news media was full of coverage of the premature death of Boyzone singer Stephen Gately, and the controversy over an article about his death written by *Daily Mail* journalist Jan Moir, in which she claimed that (despite the coroner's report) the singer's death was not of natural causes but linked to his homosexuality (Moir, 2009a, 2009b).

From the early hours of the morning on 16 October 2009, when Moir's article was published, Twitter users forwarded links to the article and offered advice on how to complain to the Press Complaints Commission about it. Celebrity 'opinion leaders' such as Stephen Fry, Graham Linehan and journalist Charlie Brooker were heavily involved in circulating messages about this issue. As a result, the article (the headline of which the *Daily Mail* edited during the day) was the most complained about in PCC history (Brook, 2009).

All of these stories were featured in mainstream news outlets, largely because of the groundswell from Twitter users. Part of the reason for Twitter's high profile within the news media, alongside the ease of access to data through systems such as the hashtags and trending topics, is the participation of celebrities and public figures within the environment.

Indeed, if a celebrity or public figure tweets about a project they are involved in or something that has happened to them, this can very quickly become an entertainment news story, and many news services and entertainment websites use tweets to provide a public or celebrity 'voice' on a particular topic. For example, when Michael Jackson died in August 2009<sup>4</sup>, many of the 'tributes' from fans or fellow stars were taken from tweets posted about the incident (Gripper and Thompson, 2009, Topping, 2009):

- r.i.p. Michael Jackson \*my love and prayers go out to the Jackson family.. "you are not alone" -mj ([Lindsay Lohan](#))
- I am greatly saddened for the loss of both Farrah Fawcett and Michael Jackson. Especially for their children! ([Demi Moore](#))

More recently, the service has played a visible role in media coverage of the UK general election, the World Cup and Wimbledon, with coverage on online and television news sources utilising tweets from politicians, sports people, celebrities and 'ordinary' people as part of their debates and discussions.

Although we must be careful not to overstate the role of the internet in people's engagement with public and civic issues, given it is still only used for these purposes by a minority of the population (Couldry, Livingstone and Markham, 2009), the way Twitter and other social networking sites, such as YouTube and Facebook (see Harfoush, 2009) have been used to create discussion and bring awareness to issues is still something worthy of our attention, and potentially hints at new models of engagement and discussion for future development.

### **Tweeting with the audience: monitoring TV 'reception' through Twitter**

Although there have been several studies of how television audiences use the internet to discuss favourite programmes (Baym, 2000, Jenkins 2006a/b, Ross, 2008), these have often focussed on communities of fans discussing particular programmes and genres in depth.

What makes discussion of television on Twitter interesting is that people will discuss all kinds of television programmes, interspersed with discussion of home and family life, work, the weather, current affairs and anything else that interests them. Users will discuss whatever they are watching at the time, be that a documentary, drama, soap opera, reality television programme or film<sup>5</sup> - as such, studying Twitter 'talk' has as much to offer for those interested in a 'media and everyday life' approach to studying media as it does for those interested in fan talk - if not more.

One of the interesting features of tweeting during television watching is that it largely requires TV must be watched at the time of broadcast, in the presence of other Twitter users. As such,



the notion of 'liveness' becomes important to consider in the way Twitter discussion of programming operates. Nick Couldry notes that 'liveness – that is, live transmission – guarantees a potential connection to our shared social realities as they are happening...'. 'Liveness' naturalises the idea that, through the media, we achieve a shared attention to the realities that matter for us as a society. This is the idea of the media as social frame, the myth of the mediated centre. It is because of this underlying idea (suggesting society as a common space focused around a 'shared' ritual centre) that watching something 'live' makes the difference it does: otherwise why should we care that others are watching the same image as us, and (more or less) when we are?' (Couldry, 2003: 97-99)

The myth of what Couldry calls 'a shared ritual centre' is something that Twitter's advocates are keen to emphasise, with conventions such as trends and hashtags being used as markers of communality, and a great many tweets on all manner of topics referencing an imagined 'we' or 'us' (see Marwick and boyd, 2010, Gruzd, Wellman and Takhteyev, forthcoming).

Although the concept of 'liveness' is a contested one, not least because it is often seen as a media construction (see Auslander, 1999, Bourdon, 2000, Couldry, 2004), the discourses surrounding liveness and the myth of it creating a sense of shared experience are very prevalent both on Twitter itself and in the way media producers and Twitter's own CEOs discuss 'second screen' viewing (Wakefield, 2011, Digital Clarity, 2011). The sense of 'liveness' peaks around media events such as sports matches, live finals of reality shows and unfolding news stories, echoing Bourdon's discussion of 'maximum liveness' whereby 'we are watching at the same time as the event, at the same time as everyone else, and, what is more, with an event taking place in different locations connected by television, as is typically the case with major media events' (2000: 534-535). On Twitter, this is clearly reflected in the trending topics where such events can dominate: for example, on Red Nose Day 2011<sup>6</sup> nine out of ten of the trending topics both in the UK and globally were all related to the charity event.<sup>7</sup>

Broadcasters and Twitter spokespeople alike are keen to emphasise the 'liveness' and 'participatory' aspects of the service, much as media producers have long emphasised the 'interactive' nature of technologies from phone-ins, to text messages and emails, to the 'red button' on television sets.

Nick Couldry identifies the way that the web has given a sense of 'online liveness' through live camera feeds and chat rooms for several years now (2004: 357). The use of Twitter and other social networking platforms as 'live', 'participatory' spaces is the latest example of the search for 'interactivity' with audiences (see Roscoe, 2004). In the keynote address at the Mobile World Congress in Barcelona in February 2011, Twitter CEO Dick Costolo was keen to emphasise the role Twitter was playing in shaping users' enjoyment of 'live' television, and

the positive implications he saw this having for television producers and advertisers, citing the examples of British 'game shows' using Twitter to interact with their audiences, the 2011 Superbowl, where users posted over 4,000 tweets per second at its peak, and 'shock jock' Howard Stern live tweeting through a television showing of film *Private Parts* and boosting its audience (Love, 2011, Penner, 2011). CNNMoney.com, reporting on this speech, used the headline 'Twitter CEO: We're saving live TV' (Goldman, 2011).

In terms of Twitter usage and discussion, this sense of liveness is not exclusive to shows that are broadcast as 'live' such as sporting events, Big Brother or news events, but relate to anything users might want to discuss with one another whilst watching as it is broadcast. Some users often feel the need to explain why they are not watching a programme live, interspersing their 'media talk' with discussion of everyday routine and personal circumstances:

- Too tired for Newswipe. Have to iPlayer it. Off to bed with a hot water bottle.
- Band practice means late home. Going to miss the start of #TBOC [#TBOC = *Tower Block of Commons*, a Channel 4 'life swap' series where MPs lived on council estates]

Bourdon acknowledges that watching television as it is broadcast often allows viewers to feel 'part of a specific interpretive community, and beyond, of a national audience' (2000: 550. See also Couldry, 2004: 355), and this sense of being part of an interpretive community permeates across the service, not least when users solicit advice from others about what to watch, often to discover what the imagined Twitter 'population' are likely to be discussing at a particular time:

- Ok folks...what are we watching tonight?? If you provide a solid argument, I could be persuaded to DVR 'LOST' & watch it later...
- What should I watch 90120 or vampire dairies?
- #tboc or #glee? [*Tower Block of Commons* and *Glee* were shown at the same time in the UK and were both popular discussion topics on Twitter]

Because of the nature of the medium lending itself to live discussion of television broadcasts, viewers in different countries, time zones or watching on a catch-up service sometimes complain about those who see television shows aired first 'spoiling' them (Jenkins 2006a: 25-58, Bruns, 2008: 270) by tweeting the outcome, but the majority seem to accept this as a likelihood, and so several users claim they will avoid Twitter until they have watched the

programme in question so as to avoid spoilers, or else blame themselves for coming across spoilers unwittingly.

Channel 4 drama *Shameless* provides a good example of how the 'liveness' of Twitter can cause problems for viewers following and contributing to discussions about a programme. The 'regular' episode broadcasts at 10pm, with a repeat on Channel 4+1 at 11pm. A 'first-look' showing of the next episode is shown on digital channel E4 at 11pm and a repeat of this at 12am on E4+1. Tweets about both episodes thus happen in the same timeframe, leading to confusion about plot or to 'spoilers' being revealed:

- oh no - just searched for #shameless before I watched the second episode... Arse!  
That was some spoiler!!! GRRRR
- I Swear I've Been Watching Shameless But I Don't Remember Frank Going Partially Blind This Episode?? Hmm..

The second tweet expresses the user's confusion at seeing discussion on Twitter of lead character Frank going blind. People tweeting about this storyline were watching the 'first look' episode on E4, whilst the original user had been watching the 'regular' episode broadcast at the same time on Channel 4+1.

### **Television and Twitter 'Trends'**

Television programmes are so frequently discussed that they regularly make the Twitter trending topics, with British, American and Australian television trending most frequently, according to the time of day. On an average evening between 7pm and 1am, the UK trending topics will be at least 50% about that evening's television, and this figure rises to 80-100% on evenings where 'event' television such as the finals of reality television series are shown. Even during major news 'events', tweets will often be about the media coverage of that event, such as during the UK General Election in 2010 where newsreaders' names trended (for further discussion of 'peaks' and trends during 'media events' see also Shamma, Kennedy and Churchill, 2011). This contrasts with tweets in the daytime that largely consist of news and sports stories, 'memes' or jokes.

Television topics that trend highly are generally those considered as 'watercooler' TV such as reality television programmes, contests and talent shows, or 'event' drama, such as cult television or series finales. These trends do not always simply reflect high ratings. For example, soap operas gain consistently high ratings, and are traditionally seen as a medium around which much talk circulates (Tulloch, 2000: 58). While soap operas are discussed on Twitter regularly, the frequency of episodes means they do not generate enough traffic to

'trend' regularly – unless there is the climax of a major storyline, they are not considered 'event' TV.

Reality/talent programmes such as *American Idol*, *Britain's Got Talent*, *The X Factor* and *Strictly Come Dancing* trend regularly during their times of broadcast. Because the hashtag system is implemented by users and is not, for the most part, centrally organised, there are often a number of hashtags or key terms people will use for a topic, particularly when it is first discussed. For example, tweets about UK dance show *Strictly Come Dancing* are tagged #scd and #strictly in fairly equal measure, and for all reality TV shows, the names of contestants, participants and special guests can also trend – the name of the programme may or may not be mentioned in these messages. Broadcasters and presenters go some way to try and regulate the hashtag system by implementing 'official' hashtags, which may be communicated through their own Twitter account, website or occasionally programme, but these are not always adopted by users, particularly if they have been discussing a series long before the 'official' accounts were created.

Whilst the range of keywords used to discuss programmes poses some problems for researchers trying to monitor discussion on a particular topic (and of course, this is as true for tweets about current affairs or sport as it is for television), it also illustrates the diversity of discussion, and can indicate which aspects or participants of a particular text are the most discussed by the audience.

For example, Susan Boyle, a contestant on *Britain's Got Talent*, was the second-most discussed person on the service in 2009, after Michael Jackson (Chowdhury, 2009), and during the 2009 *X Factor* final, twins John and Edward Grimes made the trending topics frequently, under their nickname 'Jedward'. The discussion of the twins on Twitter revealed quite a lot about the way some members of the television audience use the medium. There were comments on the act themselves and their performance:

- jedward for the win!
- why do #jedward think theyre fucking a-list celebrities? #xfactor

When they made the trending topics, people tweeted to celebrate this, something that is a common occurrence when people see something they like or are aware of 'trending':

- jedward are a trending topic awesome

When something that is significant in one country but perhaps not in others makes the trending topics, it often leads international Twitter users to ask what it is and why it is trending:

- What the hell is Jedward?
- Who or what is Jedward? Is that like a Brangelina pairing of Jacob and Edward from Twilight?

British users often speculate what America thinks when British topics trend (although rarely do they wonder what the rest of the world might think) and often take mischievous pleasure in assuming Americans might be confused by certain topics, or making fun of (usually) American misunderstandings, such as some users assuming Jedward was a reference to characters Jacob and Edward who feature in teenage novel/film series *Twilight*:

- haven't a clue but then ppl in America might think WTF is Jedward :)
- It's funny. all american/people not in britain, are like.. "Jedward? What the hell? Edward and Jacob? Pathetic!"

Sometimes programmes can also trend highly because two countries are broadcasting series simultaneously, as was the case when the Australian series of *Masterchef* aired in the same month as the UK series *Celebrity Masterchef*, when the US and UK aired *Big Brother* at the same time<sup>8</sup> and when drama series *FlashForward* was broadcast in the UK a day after it was shown in the US.

Major 'event' cult drama series such as *Lost*, *Battlestar Galactica* (#bsg), *Doctor Who*, *Torchwood* and *Ashes to Ashes* (#a2a, #ashes) also make the trending topics, partly because of dramatic episodes or twists designed to provoke discussion and partly because they have an audience who are already very active online.

What makes Twitter's discussions about television more interesting is that it is not simply programmes broadcast on the major channels that 'trend', with programmes shown on digital channels such as E4, BBC Three, BBC Four and ITV2 regularly trending.

For example, in October 2009, Charlie Brooker's one-off BBC Four programme, *Charlie Brooker's Gameswipe*, topped the global trending charts. It gained 361,000 viewers according to ratings (Holmwood, 2009), a fraction of those watching the likes of *The X Factor* or *Lost*, but the subject matter and the presence of host Brooker on Twitter (he has over 100,000 followers) made it an event with great appeal to UK Twitter users. Brooker also took part in a live question-and-answer session on Twitter after the broadcast. The programme that preceded *Gameswipe* in the schedules, *Electric Dreams*, a reality/factual series, had just under half a million viewers (again, a small fraction of the TV viewing public) yet also made the trending topics, as do several other BBC Four shows.

The prominence of programming on minority channels on Twitter can be perhaps attributed to demographics. According to research by marketing agency Digital Clarity, 80% of under 25s - whom E4 and BBC Three are marketed towards - use a 'second screen' to discuss television with friends on mobile phones, Facebook and Twitter, whilst BBC Four has a large viewership of educated people in their 20s-50s, a demographic very prominent on Twitter, with an estimated 74% of users in the 26-54 age band (DigitalBuzz, 2010). Presenters on these digital channels and 'official' Twitter feeds run by the channels and their programmes are also active on the service and thus create a sense of 'buzz' around the stations.

As we can see, Twitter offers media scholars and producers alike a unique opportunity to witness 'watercooler' TV as it happens; to determine not only what is popular ratings-wise, but what it is that gets (some) audiences talking. However, it also offers us the opportunity to monitor the immediate response of sections of the audience to almost any programme we wish to research. If you use the search facility you can find discussion about most programmes taking place in the country of your choice at the time of searching. I employed this strategy myself when studying the response to Channel 4 documentary series *Revelations*, which I will return to later.

### **Twitter as part of 'multi-platform' broadcasting**

Another possibility opened up by Twitter is a new level of interaction between those involved in making media: celebrities, journalists, producers, writers, media organisations and the users of that media. Sundet and Ytreberg (2009), in their interviews with media industry executives, found that many were keen to use interactive methods of connecting with the audience. For their respondents, 'the active attitude toward participating is seen as a basic and enduring characteristic of audiences, not as something new and unique to the current media situation' (Sundet and Ytreberg, 2009: 385) although digital media gave them new platforms to encourage this participation. Twitter seems to be one medium for providing this interactivity that has been widely embraced by the industry, alongside official websites, blogs, YouTube channels and Facebook pages.

Several 'old' media outlets acknowledge, and encourage, the use of the service whilst watching television, leading Chris Longridge of *heat* magazine to comment: 'the invention of real-time social networking sites (this means Twitter) has added a whole new dimension to the enjoyment of *Big Brother*... now you can hold a conversation with anyone you want while it's on and enjoy real-time tweeted commentary from celebs, pundits and randoms. Or, indeed, be one such commentator' (2010: 146).

Mainstream TV programmes such as the UK's *Big Brother* and *Strictly Come Dancing* operate official Twitter accounts, and audience members are encouraged to follow and interact with these accounts via the programme websites and on the TV broadcasts. These accounts are active throughout the week, and interact with viewers during the live shows, asking and answering questions and sometimes playing quizzes and games, the latest 'reinvention of the relationships between producers, texts and audiences' referenced by Roscoe in her analysis of the use of new media technologies in 'multi-platform media events' (2004).

News and current affairs media also employ this strategy, with BBC's *Question Time* being one of those that actively encourages its viewers to tweet. The official *Question Time* account recaps statements made in the programme, meaning that followers who aren't even watching the broadcast can follow and contribute to the debate. It also retweets comments, asks viewers questions and provides links to politicians' Twitter accounts and websites of interest. As previously mentioned, whilst Twitter hashtags are often organically created by users (and many users do not use hashtags on their posts) more and more programmes are circulating their own, 'official' hashtags which they promote in the show itself and via its website and encourage people to use. For *Question Time*, this is #bbqt.

- RT: @factcheck - @EdBallsMP #bbcqt says budget measures hurt poor more than rich. We've FactChecked <http://bit.ly/b5QS4J> #bbcqt
- RT @[username]: @bbcquestiontime Education is a devolved issue - at least mention England as the conversation is ALL about England
- Peter Hitchens calls the Coalition's Free Schools policy "a stunt and a gimmick" #bbcqt

Similarly, 'celebrities' and media professionals encourage discussion about their work through Twitter and often seek ideas and feedback for articles, programmes and other projects, echoing Bruns' discussions of 'prosumers' (2008: 17) and Jenkins' accounts of television producers utilising ideas from audiences within their content (2006a/b):

- Need help with my subject on angela&friends. Can you have a good time on a night out without alcohol? (DJ and presenter [Sara Cox](#)).
- Have you recently returned to the UK from Dubai following the economic crash there? get in touch with our producer ([Channel 4 News](#)).

Interacting with the audience via Twitter forms part of the material for some television and radio programmes, where active celebrity Twitter users such as presenters Krishnan Guru Murthy, Philip Schofield, Holly Willoughby and Fearne Cotton encourage participation via the

medium, and often tweet live about how the show is going - thus potentially reaching a wider 'audience' than those actually watching or listening to the broadcast at the time, and reflecting Jenkins' comment that 'Rather than talking about media producers and consumers as occupying separate roles, we might now see them as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands' (2006a: 3. See also: Jenkins, 2002: 292-3). Of course, it is worth remembering here that those producing the shows still maintain editorial control over the tweets used, as they do with phone-ins and text messaging, thus giving an impression of 'interaction' that may be exaggerated to enhance the feeling of participation and communality.

Celebrities and public figures also form the audience for many television programmes, tweeting their own thoughts and using hashtags to participate in the conversation across Twitter, again acting in some capacity as 'opinion leaders' who choose the topics to be discussed because of the number of followers reading (and often recirculating) their tweets:

- They've made this seem more dramatic than 9/11 #xfactor (Journalist/Presenter Charlie Brooker)
- Seeing everyone from the family on tv burp has just made me ridiculously happy ([Emma Kennedy](#), writer/actress).
- The Twins got chucked out of X Factor (for those who have asked). It's not John I care about. It's Edward! Oh Edward. (Jon Ronson, journalist/filmmaker)

### **Twittering Revelations: Audience research through Twitter**

Within my AHRC-funded PhD on factual television programming about religion, I used Twitter as part of my audience research. Journalist Jon Ronson had tweeted in early 2009 that he was working on a documentary about the Alpha course, part of a new Channel 4 series of religious documentaries, *Revelations*. During the process of making the film, Ronson tweeted about his experiences on a regular basis.

The eight-part documentary series was broadcast at 7pm on a Sunday evening (and at 8pm on Channel 4+1, which repeats the main schedule an hour later). The programmes in the series were all one-off, one-hour documentaries: Ronson's Alpha course film 'How to Find God', 'Muslim School' (two girls attending one of Britain's Muslim schools), 'Commando Chaplains' (military chaplains), 'The Exhumer' (the work of an exhumer), 'Muslim and Looking for Love' (a Muslim dating agency), 'Divorce: Jewish Style' (Jewish women's experiences of divorce), 'Talking to the Dead' (spiritualism), and 'How Do You Know God Exists?' (interviews with key figures from five faiths). The series ran from 28 June – 23 August 2009. For the eight-week duration I monitored the Twitter streams relating to this programme from 6.30pm (half an hour before broadcast) until 9.30pm (half an hour after broadcast on Channel 4+1) to



see what discussion was occurring about the programmes in question. Each week I used the key terms 'Revelations', 'C4' and 'Channel 4' and then terms appropriate to the programme shown that week, including the programme's title and relevant key words. I did check the preceding and following day for tweets on the programmes, but very rarely found any relevant tweets outside of the allocated three-hour time frame, again reiterating the importance of 'liveness' for Twitter discussion.

The first programme in the series was Ronson's film about the Alpha course, 'How to Find God'. This programme generated a large volume of Twitter traffic. During this time period, Ronson himself was online and answering questions about the programme:

- I'm here if anyone wants to talk during it.
- a bit too much voice over in the first 10 minutes otherwise i really like it. am here if anyone wants to ask anything while its on.

During the three hour period I used Twitter's search facility to monitor the search categories 'Alpha', 'Revelations', 'C4', 'Channel 4', 'Jon Ronson' and '@jonronson' (messages to Ronson himself)<sup>9</sup>. There were 829 messages about the programme, from 495 unique users.

Although this would not seem a large number now, in 2009 this was a lot of traffic for one television show. Ninety nine tweets were from Ronson himself, while 407 referenced his username @jonronson, either as messages directly sent to him asking questions or making comment; or messages that referenced him within the content, meant for the attention of other users as well as Ronson:

- [@jonronson](#) great show, very clever how the course works. These people are all seeking something it seems and a good sales pitch works [#alpha](#)
- Loving [@jonronson](#)'s Revelation film on c4 now. Intriguing
- [@jonronson](#) Sorry I'm late to the Alpha Twitter party, was it uncomfortable waiting to see if anyone spoke in tongues? BTW Excellent film.

In these tweets we can see a mixture of humour, opinion and commentary and of deference to Ronson's elevated status as 'celebrity' and 'producer' as well as acknowledgement of the watching and discussion of the programme as being an 'event': the 'Alpha Twitter party'.

Ronson himself tweeted a mixture of commentary and response to people's questions:

- [@\[username\]](#) weirder than that

- @ [username] We didn't select the characters. They volunteered themselves on the first night.
- Ed the older man has a very unexpected hobby we'll soon learn about

I organised the data into categories according to the content of the tweets. 101 tweets contained praise for the programme, whilst twenty contained criticism. 102 were promoting the programme to other users, encouraging them to watch. These came before the programme, during it and after, with later messages imploring people to watch on Channel 4+1 or on 4OD, the channel's online/cable catch-up service. Sixty-seven messages contained running commentary on the events or participants in the documentary, sixty commentary or questions on the film-making and technical aspects (such as visual effects and use of music). Sixty eight messages contained humour; forty-three of those were messages directly referencing Ronson. Other topics discussed included people's responses to the participants in the film, to the Alpha course and to religion itself, fifty five of them containing details of people's personal experiences with Alpha or Christianity. Sixty eight of the messages made little comment other than the writer was watching the programme.

Tweets are written with different publics in mind (see Marwick and boyd, 2010). Some are written simply to state what the user is doing:

- About to sit down and enjoy [@jonronson](#)'s alpha course film on channel 4!
- Watching Revelations about people on the Alpha course.

Some writers contextualise their comments so their followers will understand:

- Documentary about Alpha Course on C4. If only good things came out of religion (and mild indoctrination), maybe it wouldn't make me so angry.
- Watching a programme on the Alpha Course. Always wanted to go on it to further my knowledge but I'm scared of who it could make me become.

Others expect those reading to be part of the conversation on a particular topic; particularly those that act as running commentary on events in the film, where the only clue to followers about the topic is the use of a relevant hashtag:

- Doesn't think the #Alpha film was very representative of what happens in smaller churches. Interesting, just a bit misleading in places.
- Oooh. This is getting embarrassing. #alpha
- "Accidentally". [@jonronson](#) you crafty peice of work! #alpha

- [@jonronson](#) Ed sums up why I don't take Communion when Mam drags me to Mass back home. Tongues is just weird altogether #alpha

These latter posts are likely to be aimed at an audience following the conversation on Twitter through monitoring the relevant hashtag, as I was doing

Some users post messages directly to others, in a one-to-one conversation, but this is often harder to monitor through the search facility as one-to-one conversation may not always include the same hashtags and keywords as tweets intended to be part of the public conversation:<sup>10</sup>

- [[@username](#)] it is good. are you watching that '**revelations**' thing. they asked people to speak in tongues. religion is SUCH bull
- [[@username](#)] just saw a little bit of channel four's **Revelations**: how to find god. had just eaten. didn't do me very good...

Following broadcast, I set up a short online 'exit survey' to get users' initial responses to the programme and potentially make some contacts who could help in future audience research on the *Revelations* series. Ronson (whom I now knew a little, having emailed each other several times and having met at the film's preview screening) forwarded the link to people and asked them to fill the survey in. I also messaged some of the people tweeting about the programme with the link although the sheer volume of traffic meant it wasn't possible to message everyone.

I received eighty responses to the survey, most of which came through within the two hours after broadcast. From this I gained the contact details of some users whom I began following (and many of these people began following me) and I invited people to take part in future discussion about the series.

The following programmes generated different amounts of Twitter traffic, with only fourteen unique tweets on episode two, 'Muslim School' and fifty-two on episode eight 'How Do You Know God Exists', with everything else falling in between these two in terms of quantity. The decline in tweets compared to the opening programme is interesting in itself; showing which programmes were considered most worthy of discussion amongst Twitter users. 'How to Find God' prompted such huge traffic largely due to Jon Ronson's involvement with it, his large number of followers, and his willingness to participate in discussion during broadcast. As well as this, the Alpha course is something a large number of people are aware of, unlike the more obscure topics of Jewish divorce and Muslim schooling. Both the atheist movement and the charismatic and evangelical wings of Christianity also have large numbers of active Twitter

users, which may have also contributed to the activity around this first programme. Some of the latter programmes in July and August were scheduled at the same time as Ashes cricket matches which could have also contributed to the lack of discussion about them.

The other programmes in the series tended to have markedly different responses according to subject. There were some potentially Islamophobic tweets about 'Muslim School' and there was division over whether the parents and teachers were doing the right thing for their children or not:

- lol @ muslim school. muslim bitches be crazy. its funny when thr R 2 of them talking to the camera with head scarfs i cant tell whos talking.
- Both mums have good attitude towards their daughters and reason behind decision for Muslim school is interesting
- Channel 4 programme Revelations; good demonstration of the controlling nature of organised religion. Pity the children, indoctrinated pawns.

In the discussions about both 'The Exhumer' and 'Talking to the Dead' a greater level of humour was displayed than discussions about all other programmes except 'How To Find God':

- Watching Channel 4 doc about spiritualists. One of them's reading a newspaper called Psychic News. Obviously its for not very good psychics.
- going to watch a tele programme about talking to the dead . Bit like when my missus talks to me.
- Watching a programe on exhumation - just put me off my banana!
- oh my god cremate me. i don't want 5 men in miners helmet's chucking my femur and skull in a skip then building a Fatty Arbuckles. (TV Critic/Journalist [Grace Dent](#))
- QOTD from 'The Exhumer' on Chan4 "I didn't know which grave she was in so I said I'd do a little digging".

The final programme provided the most inflamed discussion since programme one, with people offering strong opinions on the religious leaders featured, on the programme and interviewer Antony Thomas, and on religion itself:

- Why is it when religious commentators mention the atheist bus campaign, they never mention religious ads telling people they'll go to hell.
- is watching religious "thinkers" spout meaningless bullshit on some daft programme on C4.

- finding channel 4's Revelations: how do you know God exists? so helpful and wishes everyone could watch it.
- watching Revelations on channel Four; oh how the Church annoys me!
- Well that was a load of wishy-washy religious pap, no conclusions, no revelations, just the usual religious beating-around-the-bush.
- [@username] I love peace! I just don't think that we need theology to achieve it #revelations

With most of the programmes, some viewers revealed details about their own beliefs and experiences, and those of people they know:

- Watching some spiritualist church thing on channel 4 reminding me off the stories of [@\[username\]](#) fam, who are into all that crap xxxxxx
- Tonight's "Revelations" (on C4+1 in 10mins if you aren't watching it now) is about the Spiritualist Church. My family was involved; bizarre.
- Watched programme about religious divorces within the Orthodox Jewish community. Got progressively angrier and remembered why I walked away.
- I have watched revelations on CH4 and i'm truly moved i'm deep in thought and my ideas are strong...

Some respondents chose to intersperse discussion about the programme with details of their habits and routines which is fairly typical of the discourse on Twitter, where discussion of current affairs and popular culture is frequently intermingled with discussion of the domestic and personal:

- why am i watching "Divorce Jewish Style" rofl./ gotta have a bath like, but thats effort mannn.
- soo hungry, gonna watch jewish divorce programme.

Despite the limited sample of tweets about these latter programmes, they still came from a diverse number of users (no unique users commented on all eight programmes) and the combination of personal experience, humour, opinion and reference to everyday life revealed within the tweets are symptomatic of how much 'media talk' operates on Twitter.

### **Conclusion**

So why tweet about something you are watching on television or reading in a newspaper? My research and my own experiences of using the service suggest the reasons are diverse: for some it is about recommending something they have enjoyed to others they think might

enjoy it too. For some it is a desire to talk about something you've read, heard or seen, and perhaps what it meant to you. For others, it is about arguing or agreeing with a particular perspective and in doing so, making your own views heard. For others still, it is about being part of a live conversation stream, being in the moment, engaging with media (or sport and current events) in a communal atmosphere, echoing one of Sundet and Ytreberg's respondents' view of television having 'gone from being an activity where you sit alone, to being an activity where you have the opportunity to interact with others' (2009: 386) – although it is not always easy to monitor how this interaction develops from one to many conversation into splinter one-to-one or few-to-few conversations outside of the main 'hashtagged' streams.

Henry Jenkins (2009) describes Twitter's message as 'here it is' (for example sharing links, news and information) and 'here I am' (individuals revealing information about themselves), and this is certainly true in terms of the use of Twitter by media audiences. They are sharing the 'here it is' of what they are watching, reading or listening to, as well as links to other relevant sites and media (such as *Question Time* viewers tweeting links to political websites or *Big Brother* viewers posting YouTube videos of the housemates before they were in the show).

They are also pronouncing 'here I am' through their tweets about media products, and, as with all online presences, there is an amount of performance here - humour is often used to attract attention, and humorous tweets are often those that are 'retweeted', and of course the choice of usernames and avatars display a level of 'performance'. Even though the service encourages users to use their real name and a picture of themselves, the pictures are often carefully chosen, and may also be annotated by a 'twibbon' – an icon symbolising an interest or cause.

This 'performance' within tweeting is something covered in more depth in Marwick and boyd's study of the 'imagined audience' on Twitter, where they describe how users modify their performance in terms of language and emphasis according to who they perceive their audience to be and what they deem appropriate to share in front of that audience: 'Many users consciously use Twitter as a platform to obtain and maintain attention, by targeting tweets towards their perceived audience's interest and balancing different topic areas' (2010: 9).

One thing Jenkins' definition fails to address, however, is the communal aspect of the service, as the communal discussions that take place on Twitter are just as important as the presentation of self and the circulation of interesting material – although from a practical standpoint, the level of community and communality here may be more fragmented and

harder to trace than in a more linear and contained environment such as a forum or Facebook page.

Using Twitter in audience research can show us new ways in which part of the media audience is mobilising and interacting with the people that are making media. It can help us take the 'pulse' of public reaction to world events, news stories and new media texts - in real time, as these things happen. It provides instant access to people who are often happy to communicate their thoughts and feelings in an articulate but succinct way. It can reveal new aspects of 'everyday' talk about the media, and can also help us understand when and how something becomes a more significant media 'event' (Dayan and Katz 1992, Couldry, 2002).

I am not making claims here that Twitter is the perfect medium for all audience research, or that it will demonstrate just what the audience of a particular programme, film, musician or article are thinking. The users of Twitter don't represent the entire audience for any given text, nor can they. There are also clear hierarchies of power within the 'Twittersphere' with celebrities, journalists and 'official' accounts from organisations playing a very visible role in (re)circulating information and influencing debate, which must be recognised when we consider the claims for it being a democratic space where all can participate.

Despite these notes of caution, for anyone interested in studying the media, studying the way 'audiences' and celebrities, producers and media professionals now interact, or simply interested in audience responses to different media, Twitter marks a potentially significant development, and one it would be remiss to ignore.

### **Biographical Note**

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<sup>1</sup> Paid for advertising in the form of promotional tweets by companies (see Stone 2010). As a regular Twitter user I have yet to see many of these tweets in my timeline (although they often appear in the trending topics), so it remains to be seen how this model develops in the future.

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, many people may well be using Twitter on the same platform (e.g. a laptop or mobile phone) as they are watching television or listening to the radio and checking news websites (I certainly engage in these practices), making it a service that is well suited to convergent media technologies.

<sup>3</sup> It is interesting to note that, whilst these 'opinion leaders' are high-profile, high-status users within the Twitter populace, outside of this environment, some of them, such as Linehan, journalists Caitlin Moran and Charlie Brooker and writer/actress [Emma Kennedy](#) have very little in the way of 'celebrity status', known only to a smaller audience who read particular

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newspapers or watch certain television shows, whilst on Twitter they are among the most influential users in terms of numbers of followers, retweets and connections with other high-status users. For example, Kennedy is often one of the first 'celebrity' tweeters to welcome new celebrities to the service, and to alert her followers to the presence of these newcomers.

<sup>4</sup> At the time, Jackson's death was the most tweeted-about topic on the service, with 456 tweets per second on June 25, 2009. A measure of the service's growth is to compare it with the Superbowl in 2011 that registered almost ten times the volume of tweets per second, despite being a predominantly American news event, as opposed to Jackson's death which was a global one.

<sup>5</sup> And the same is true of radio, particularly national radio stations, such as BBC Radio 1 and BBC 6Music.

<sup>6</sup> Red Nose Day is a bi-annual telethon on the BBC where comedians and celebrities raise money for Comic Relief. It alternates each year with sister event Sport Relief.

<sup>7</sup> The tenth topic was 'Rebecca Black' a teenage singer whose YouTube video had 'gone viral' that week (see Brooker, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> To avoid confusion, many users opted to use the hashtags #bb11 (2009) and #bb12 (2010) for the US series and #bb10 (2009) and #bb11 (2010) for the UK one, indicating which season numerically each country's version of the show had reached.

<sup>9</sup> Since I conducted this study, a whole range of more sophisticated tools to enable researchers to analyse tweets have emerged, such as Research.ly and 140kit.

<sup>10</sup> Although intended as one-to-one conversation, they become public in two ways, firstly by virtue of being searchable through the public search (unless the users both have privacy settings on) and secondly by appearing in the timelines of anyone following both users involved in the conversation.