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Abstract

This paper attempts to advance the study of microblogging and political events by investigating how one particular high profile programme acted as a stimulus to real-time commentary from viewers using Twitter. Our case study is a controversial, high-ratings episode of BBC Question Time, the weekly British political debate show, broadcast in October 2009, in which Nick Griffin, leader of the far right British National Party, appeared as a panelist. The 'Viewertariat' that emerges around a political event such as this broadcast affords the opportunity to explore interaction across media formats. The paper contains our first efforts to understand this relationship. In order to do this, we gathered 43,730 tweets and analysed them to learn the extent to which this content was structured through the use of addressed tweets, hashtags and retweets, and the distribution of comments among both users and over time. We then narrow our focus to understand a specific segment of the programme, focusing on a period around 23:20, the point in time where the Viewertariat is most verbose.

We argue that this example demonstrates a fluid 'structure of participation' in which the Viewertariat responded to the broadcast in various ways. This raises several questions for further research and offers the potential for great methodological innovation, an issue we consider in the conclusion of this paper.

Introduction

The episode of the Question Time broadcast on BBC1 between 22:35 and 23:40 on the 22nd October 2009 was historic for a great many reasons. Most notably, it was the first time that a representative of the far right, in the form of Nick Griffin, Member of the European Parliament and leader of the British National Party, had been invited to sit on the panel on this flagship discussion programme. Fuelled by this controversy, the programme received massive press attention and drew over eight million viewers, more than three times its normal audience share (Deans, 2009). This event was, thus far at least, the culmination of an important period in the history of the far right in the United Kingdom, marked by unprecedented electoral success, first during the 2008 London Assembly elections, where the party achieved its first assembly member, and then during the 2009 European Parliament elections, when the BNP gained two MEPs (for a discussion of causes of BNP political support, see John et al., 2006).

Aside from this fraught political context, this broadcast had additional significance: it exemplified a rapidly changing media ecology, characterized by connectivity, real-time participation and the blurring of the distinction between old and new media. Nowhere was this more evident than on the microblogging service Twitter. Political website Tweetminster estimated that 53,500 posts related to the programme were published on the Twitter site while it was on air.[1] The weight of these numbers was such that terms related to the programme rapidly rose to the top of the Twitter global trending topics list. For this reason then, Griffin's appearance on Question Time was a significant event because it pointed towards a new way of watching major broadcast events. We term this the rise of *the Viewertariat* – a section of the audience that, aided by emerging

technologies such as Twitter, comments on events on the screen, responds and gives meaning to the broadcast in real time. It is a change that can be understood within broader transformations in both the production and consumption of political media.

The example of Question Time is a useful one for those seeking to understand these developments. It is, in both senses of the word, an "institution" – a venerable and reliably predictable part of the British current affairs broadcasting set-up, but also a political event of note, attracting senior figures from the major parties each week. It is certainly the case that the format of political institutions influences the impact that new technology has (Anstead, 2008, Anstead and Chadwick, 2008), and BBC Question Time is no exception. This convergence of old and new media, and the information ecology this creates presents fundamental challenges to broadcasters, audiences and analysts alike (Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2010).

In particular, the Question Time *format* raises a number of challenges. The programme seeks to create a "townhall" mode of discussion. The panel consists of five people, including politicians from across the party spectrum, commentators, and the occasional celebrity. An audience made-up of the general public is able to ask questions on topical events. However, these questions are pre-screened, and the discussion is strictly moderated by respected BBC journalist David Dimbleby. Thus we have a format that was consciously designed to create a sense of participatory politics on-screen. However, the contents of that programme are also tightly controlled.

The advent of technologies such as Twitter has augmented this model with an additional layer of participation online. Furthermore, while this might be a semi-official form of participation during the programme (at various points during the 22nd October broadcast, Dimbleby suggested to viewers that they might want to use Twitter to comment about the programme), the constraints imposed on the studio audience – regulating such things as how long they can talk for, how many times they will be called upon, or the tone of their

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[1] This figure was calculated by Tweetminster using a combination of searches for hashtags and relevant terms, such as panellists' names. In addition, patterns of posting, both by individual users and in exchanges between users, were used to predict if content was related to the programme, even if it lacked key terms.

contributions – do not exist in the Twittersphere as, quite simply, *there is no chairperson online*. This dichotomy brings into sharp relief two distinct models of popular participation in politics, one created and regulated in a top-down manner by a political elite, the other far more organic and, seemingly at least, involving fewer barriers and checks. In the case of Question Time then, these two modes of participation co-exist.

The aim of this working paper is to start to consider this relationship through an exploration of Viewertariat responses to a specific, high profile event. In order to do this, we will be analyzing a sample of tweets gathered during the 22nd October edition of Question Time. Our focus in this working paper is simply on how events on the screen relate to real-time participation online and the nature of the commenting going on as the programme was broadcast. Since Twitter comments have a particular structure which must be understood in order to make sense of the patterns of Viewertariat comments, however, we will briefly introduce this first.

Twitter and microblogging

Set up in San Francisco, the Twitter service went live in August 2006, and was already creating quite a buzz in the technology community by the time of the South by Southwest conference in Austin, Texas in March 2007 (see for example: Douglas, 2007, Levy, 2007). However, it really came to the attention of the broader public in 2008-2009, when it became associated with, among other things, political campaigning in the 2008 US election, protest and insurgency in countries such as Iran, and attempts by freedom of information campaigners to circumnavigate court injunctions. It was also used by a number of celebrities to raise their profiles, such as Ashton Kutcher, Oprah Winfrey and, in the United Kingdom, Stephen Fry (Booth, 2009, Fry, 2010, Obama, 2010, Winfrey, 2010, Kutcher, 2010, Web Ecology Project, 2009).

Broadly, Twitter can be defined by three characteristics. First, it provides a publishing platform with low barriers to participation. Users post comments by responding to the question "*What are you doing?*" These messages, known as

"tweets", are shown in a reverse chronological timeline and can be up to 140 characters in length. While this may seem like a limitation, this rule made Twitter perfectly suited for use with existing mobile technology, first through SMS text messaging and, more recently, internet-enabled smart phones.

Second, the site also contains social networking elements, as users can "follow" other users. Unlike sites such as Facebook though, this relationship can be asymmetrical. User A can follow user B, but the reverse relationship does not have to exist. This characteristic of the service means that users can structure a wide variety of relationships on it, as Java et al. have noted (2007). For example, celebrities with millions of followers can use it to broadcast information. However, a smaller number of reciprocal relationships (when two parties follow each other, Twitter terms them as "friends") can be used to construct a more complex, multi-directional interaction. In this sense then, Twitter fulfills the criteria laid out by Chadwick (2006) to facilitate the multiple types of communication feasible on the internet: one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-one and many-to-many.

Third, and also differentiating it from some other Web 2.0 services, is Twitter's open structure (Twitter.com, 2010). This last characteristic makes it a particularly versatile service, ripe for development and innovative uses. In this sense, it is a genuinely generative platform, as defined by Zittrain (2006), with many of its potential applications discovered by users, rather than conceived by its creators. This last characteristic is reflected in the many forms Twitter use has taken beyond publishing 140 character status updates. A variety of content types, including web addresses, audio files and photographs, are common on Twitter.

However, perhaps the most interesting characteristic of Twitter, for our purposes in this paper at least, is its ability to facilitate structured modes of communication. As boyd et al (2010) have noted, users can employ various strategies to direct their tweets and take part in comment

strands on specific topics. Three have particular significance:

- **Comments containing *@username*.** By including the name of another user in their tweet, comments get sent directly to them, although they also remain publicly available. In their study of the phenomenon, Honeycott and Herring (2009) refer to this idea as "addressivity", and argue that it is capable of imposing some order on Twitter interaction. Significantly, @username tweets are used for a great many purposes, including entering into a discussion with other users, making comments about another individual on Twitter, or imploring people to action. Furthermore, the propensity of Twitter users to employ this tool seems to be increasing. Honeycott and Herring found that upwards of 30 per cent of tweets in the three samples they gathered were directed tweets, a figure nearly double the number in an earlier study (Java et al., 2007). Boyd et al. (2010) found a similarly high proportion, with 36 per cent of their sample containing @username.

- **Hashtags are codes inserted into a message proceeded by the # symbol**. These are used for categorization purposes, or, as McNely puts it, to make content "agreeable and searchable" (2009). However, hashtagging seems to remain a largely minority practice. In their sample gathered to study retweeting, boyd et al. (2010) also noted that only 5 per cent of tweets in a general sample contained a hashtag. That said, it is a potent tool for organization, as the #iranelection tag has proved (Web Ecology Project, 2009). Question Time has a semi-official hashtag, #BBCQT.

- **Retweets of content created by others.** These occur when people copy and paste the comment of another user and publish it as their own status, with attribution. The only study of this phenomenon thus far was carried out by boyd et al. (2010). They found that practices of retweeting

remain fairly informal,[2] with a variety of conventions being used to indicate content republished in this way. In all, 3 per cent of the tweets gathered in a general sample of Twitter content for that study were categorized as retweets. Users employed retweets for a variety of reasons, including the amplification of content, to comment on other people's posts, a public statement of agreement, or to recognize the tweets of less popular users. Interestingly, boyd et al. found that the content of retweets was fundamentally different to content in general. Weblinks were far more common, appearing in 52 per cent of the tweets, as opposed to 22 per cent in the general sample, as were hashtags (rising from 5 per cent to 18 per cent).

The piece of research which most closely replicates the interests of this working paper is Shamma et al (2009). This paper, entitled *Tweet the Debate,* examined the use of Twitter during a presidential debate between Barack Obama and John McCain in September 2008. In particular, the researchers were interested in a project called *Hack the Debate*, created by a channel called Current TV. Current TV encouraged viewers to comment on the broadcast as they watched it, and use the hashtag *#current*. These tweets could then be harvested, with some of them appearing as rolling comments on the bottom of the screen during the debate programme. Shamma et al. termed this process "community annotation". One interesting pattern noted, both in this work and in previous research (Shamma and Liu, 2009), is that the quantity of online comments relating to an event increases immediately after it ends.

The sample

As a result of its open API, there are a number of ways of gathering data from Twitter, making it a

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[2] Indeed, these methods for using Twitter remain in flux. In the period between the dataset for this paper being gathered and its publication, Twitter moved to officially support retweeting and create a universalised system for its use.

great subject of study for scholars. Searches can be conducted in real time, gathering data as it is published online. However, by definition the search terms would need to be defined in advance of the sample being gathered. An alternative method for collection is to the use the *Twitter Search* tool for retrospective data gathering. This was the method employed for this project. To achieve this, a rudimentary Adobe Air powered tool, *Tweet Xtractor*, was coded.[3] Users can enter the search terms and specific time periods they are interested in, and the tool would then query Twitter Search and download any matches that it generated, creating a database of the results.

This approach allowed us to gather a sizable sample of relevant tweets. However, the method also created certain problems. Twitter Search was originally set-up by an independent company, Summize, which was established in November 2006, and then bought by Twitter in July 2008.This mixed parentage means that the two technologies are not wholly compatible. Notably, the user ID assigned to individuals by Twitter and Twitter Search are completely different. This creates problems when trying to attribute tweets from the sample to specific authors such as politicians or celebrities. More significantly, using the Twitter Search tool, as opposed to real time search techniques, ensures that samples will *never* be wholly complete. The reason for this is that Twitter Search never returns all of the relevant content. Social networking blog Mashable, for example, suggests that the service's hit rate is sometimes as low as fifty per cent (Herzog, 2009). This difficulty can be overcome partially by using multiple search terms, but it guarantees that total coverage is possible with this method.

For this study, we used a variety of search terms to ensure as complete a sample as possible. Unlike the most similar study examining the relationship between Twitter and live television events (Shamma et al., 2009), we wanted to go beyond

simply extracting the "official" hashtagged content, but instead aimed to understand the broader use of Twitter in response to a broadcast event. Indeed, given previous work on the very limited use of hashtags by Twitter users (boyd et al., 2010), its seems fair to hypothesize that content containing the #BBCQT hashtag will only be a subset of a broader discussion taking place online.

To that end, we carried out multiple searches using different programme related terms. These were:

- *BBCQT* (the dominant BBC Question Time hashtag);
- Question time;
- Questiontime (assuming people might miss-spell the correct programme title or contract it to save characters in their tweets);
- *British National Party;*
- *BNP;*
- *Dimbleby* (referencing David Dimbleby, chairman of the show);
- *Griffin* (referencing Nick Griffin, panelist and leader of the BNP);
- *Straw* (referencing Jack Straw, panelist and Labour Minister for Justice);
- *Warsi* (referencing Baroness Warsi, panelist and Conservative Shadow Minister for Community Cohesion);
- *Huhne* (referencing Chris Huhne, panelist and Liberal Democrat Home Affairs Spokesperson);
- *Greer* (referencing Bonnie Greer, panelist and cultural commentator).

Tweet Xtractor was set to gather tweets containing these terms and published between midnight GMT Sunday, 18th October and midnight GMT Sunday, 25th October 2009. The total number of records gathered over the period is shown in Table 1. However, for this study, we are especially interested in the duration of the programme and the period immediately afterwards. The number of tweets for these periods is also shown.

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[3] The technical work necessary to gather the sample was done by Edward Anstead. The authors would like to thank him for his efforts and patience with our requests. Queries related to the tool and requests for further technical information should be directed to him at edwardanstead@gmail.com.

Table 1: Summary of Search Terms and Number of Tweets Gathered

Search term	Total tweets	Programme period	1 hr after programme
BBCQT	26697	9095	4841
BNP	37624	5822	3199
British National Party	1044	73	35
Dimbleby	2697	1791	312
Griffin	7110	3238	1649
Greer	75270	21684	6796
Huhne	922	553	102
Question Time	31476	6607	2116
Questiontime	2305	1170	147
Straw	4841	4944	820
Warsi	1621	985	232
Total	**191607**	**55962**	**20249**

It should be noted that these numbers relate to unfiltered data, so will contain duplicates (where more than one of the search terms was used) and also false positives. This is a particular problem, as we decided to search only with surnames. However, while words like "Straw" obviously appeared in non-Question Time related posts, we felt this was a more appropriate search method, as to have searched only for full names would have meant potentially missing out many tweets where users were referring to participants only by their surname. There are other problems with this method. Search terms also present a particular difficulty when dealing with conversational threads, as has been noted in previous work (Hughes and Palen, 2009). While the first comment in a conversation, which initiates the discussion, may use relevant and predictable terms, responses may assume knowledge, and thus omit the very words we could use when scouring for data.

Despite these difficulties, the sample gathered was substantial. When duplicate tweets were removed, the total set generated from all the searches amounted to some 43,730 records. Given that political website Tweetminster estimated that 53,500 tweets related to the programme were published during its broadcast, this represents a very significant proportion of the total content on Twitter related to the event.

Commenting patterns among the Viewertariat

The sample can be used to draw a number of conclusions about the way people use Twitter during a live television event. Given that the hashtag was one of our search terms, it is certainly not surprising that it was considerably more common in our dataset than in previous studies relying on a general sample of Twitter content. In all, 45.24 per cent of our tweets featured the #bbcqt tag. However, by implication, this also means that the majority of tweets related to the programme were not tagged in this way. An important research question for future studies of the relationship between live television and real time commentary will be to understand how these two groups – hashtaggers and non-hashtaggers – differ from each other. We might hypothesize that the former group are more versed in the etiquette of micro-blogging and thus constitute an elite group, who comment more frequently and are more likely to engage in programme related conversation, while the latter are more casual users, posting less and with lower levels of interaction.

Table 2: Distribution of Tweets Among Commenters, Divided into Quintiles

Quintile of tweeters	Mean no. of tweets	Proportion of content
Most prolific 20 per cent	7.1 per person	54.76 per cent
Second most prolific 20 per cent	2.48 per person	19.11 per cent
Third most prolific 20 per cent	1.39 per person	10.71 per cent
Fourth most prolific 20 per cent	1 per person	7.7 per cent
Bottom 20 per cent	1 per person	7.7 per cent

It is also important to make two other points about the use of hashtags. First, it was not a wholly unified system, with some users employing alternatives to #bbcqt. For example, the less used #questiontime still appeared several times in the sample. Second, users seemed to use hashtags for purposes beyond organization, such as mocking participants in the programme. For example, the meme #fathitler was used a total of 253 times during the broadcast period.

Directed tweets also feature heavily in the sample. In all, 26.76 per cent of all tweets gathered contained the @ symbol. This figure is marginally lower than those discovered in studies that looked for directivity by sampling data from the general Twitter stream (boyd et al., 2010, Honeycott and Herring, 2009). Drawing on theories of media publics (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998, Scannell, 2000, Warner, 2002) we would tentatively suggest that this may be because viewers, while watching a broadcast and responding live, may conceptualise themselves as part of a diffused audience, an indefinite number of people sharing an experience, and thus on many occasions be addressing their fellow-viewers in general rather directing a comment to a particular friend or individual.

Retweets also made up an important element of the sample. Using boyd et al.'s (2010) suggestions for the various conventions used to indicate retweeting, we searched the dataset to establish just how common retweeting was. During the programme there were 6,914 retweets in the dataset, amounting to some 15.81 per cent of the sample. Given that boyd et al. found that only 3 per cent of Twitter content was made up of retweets this indicates a marked change in use. We might infer that the shared experience of the broadcast catalyses this particular social aspect of

Twitter, encouraging users to share content more frequently. Further coding and analysis of the dataset is required to establish exactly what viewers were retweeting and how it related to the broadcast. Another significant question that needs to be addressed when examining the structure of the sample is to examine who was actually producing content. In all, 16,852 people published tweets that appeared in the sample. As a result, the mean number of tweets per person was 2.59. However, research into other aspects of the internet and popular participation (see for example Hindman, 2009 on blogging and Wright, 2006 on online forums) has noted that users' propensity to comment is not evenly distributed. Instead, participation reflects the long tail pattern of distribution (Anderson, 2006), where some users contribute disproportionately large numbers of comments. This pattern seems to be replicated in our sample. More than half the tweeters in the sample (8,803) only commented once during the programme. As a result, they only accounted for 20 per cent of the content. In contrast, the most prolific individual tweeted 84 times during the duration of the programme.

The distribution of tweets among users is shown in Table 2, divided into quintiles. While the data does not exactly accord to the 80-20 rule (where 20 per cent of the users provide 80 per cent of the content) it is clearly a lopsided distribution, with the most vocal twenty per cent of commentators producing more than half the tweets related to the programme.

A second important question related to the sample is when the tweets were occurring and how they are distributed over the duration of the programme. The average number of tweets per minute for the scheduled duration of the broadcast was therefore 673.
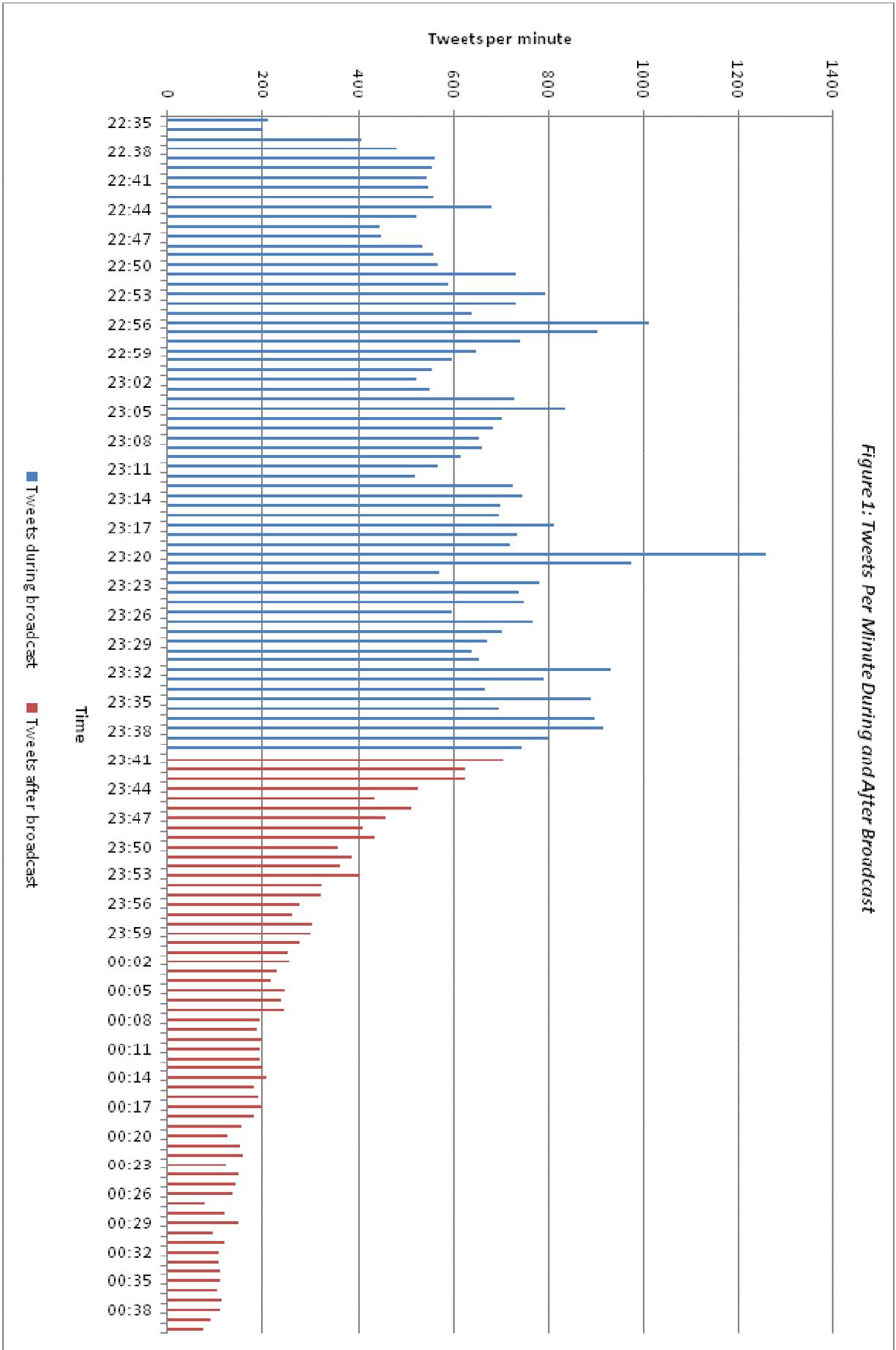
Figure 1: Tweets Per Minute During and After Broadcast

However, in reality, the Viewertariat was more prolific at certain moments in the programme and quieter in others. The highest number of tweets occurred at 23:20, when the dataset contains 1257 items. In contrast, the quietest minute occurred at 22.36, when the dataset contains only 201 tweets.

The distribution of tweets over time is shown in Figure 1, which leads to certain conclusions. First, there does seem to be an increase in the rate of tweeting over the duration of the broadcast, although this relationship is certainly not linear. Instead there are peaks and troughs throughout the programme. The data in these graphs also suggest that the findings of Shamma et al. (2009) in their study of the 2008 US Presidential Election debates are not replicated – namely that there is no peak in tweeting after the broadcast event has finished. Indeed the decline that sets in after the end of Question Time remains consistent in the period after the programme, dropping down to less than a hundred tweets per minute less than an hour after the conclusion of the broadcast.

An obvious issue raised by the non-linear distribution of tweets during the broadcast is what stimulates moments of increased activity on Twitter? This issue takes us to the heart of the method of multi-modal content analysis that we wish to propose for understanding the relationship between traditional broadcasting and the real-time internet. Examining the sample gathered at 23:20 (the peak moment for Twitter users during the broadcast), we can draw some conclusions about what was driving up the level of comment at this moment.

Content analysis of tweets

Using the SPSS Text Analysis package, it was possible to quantify how frequently a number of key terms appeared in the tweets we had extracted. Crucially, this software does not just count up occasions when the term is used precisely, but is also capable of counting and organizing synonyms. In order to understand what happened at 23:20 and why the Viewertariat was so vocal, we focused our initial analysis on the

time surrounding that moment. A summary of the results is shown in Table 3.

In particular, three things stand out about the content that was published during 23:20. First, is the high frequency of comments that mention panelist Bonnie Greer. Indeed, this particular minute is the only point in the sample shown in Table 3 when Nick Griffin is supplanted as the most-mentioned individual. This change is explained by reference to a transcript of the programme. At 23:17, Greer directly attacked the historical grounding for the BNP's policies, as well as lambasting Griffin's academic qualifications:

> ***Bonnie Greer:*** [23:17:33] Ok, when the ice melted, 17,000 years ago, people came up from the south didn't they? They couldn't have come from the north. Where would they have come from? The south. And you know this because you have a 2:2 in history.[4] All of us [applause], all of us, all of us are descended from Africa. You wouldn't disagree with me on that would you? Ok, now the only, the only people who were here on this continent, and I've got a lot of books in fact I brought a lot of stuff for you to read Nick because you need it, the, the, the only people who were here – and I call them people – were the andodols, those were the only people who were on the European continent. Now if you don't believe that you can come to the British Museum, we've got lots and lots of information for you. Because I really wish you would come, because the history you've got on your website is a joke. [23:18:21][5]

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[4] A 2:2 is a degree classification in UK university education that lies in the middle/lower end of the grade distribution bell curve.
[5] A note on time references: At this moment, we are assuming that programme began precisely as the published schedule indicated. In reality, this seems unlikely and the accuracy of these times could be enhanced by getting a precise time reference.

Table 3: Frequency of top ten occurring terms in the 5 minutes before and after 23:20

Time	No. of tweets	Term 1	Term 2	Term 3	Term 4	Term 5	Term 6	Term 7	Term 8	Term 9	Term 10
23:15	701	BBCQT (350)	Nick Griffin (214)	No (119)	BNP (67)	Twitpic.co m /mie5s (66)	Photo (64)	Question Time (63)	Lewis (52)	Excellent (32)	Huhne (31)
23:16	699	BBCQT (341)	Nick Griffin (235)	Not relevant (101)	No (91)	Skin colour (86)			Photo		Lewis (30)
23:17	811	BBCQT (421)	Nick Griffin (279)	Not relevant (127)	Skin colour (89)	No (89)	Question Time (51)	Question Time (53)	Twitpic.co m /mie5s (47)	BNP (35)	Racist (34)
23:18	735	BBCQT (339)	Nick Griffin (286)	No (93)	Question Time (62)	BNP (54)	Not relevant (49)	Skin colour (39)	Twitpic.co m /mie5s (35)	Photo (34)	Excellent (34)
23:19	721	BBCQT (330)	Nick Griffin (199)	Bonnie Greer (119)	No (78)	BNP (60)	Excellent (41)	Like (36)	People (24)	Bad (22)	Twitpic.co m /mie5s (21)
23:20	1258	BBCQT (646)	Bonnie Greer (394)	Nick Griffin (241)	Dick Griffin (233)	Excellent (130)	Like (120)	Question Time (69)	No (81)	Good (41)	Greer (36)
23:21	976	BBCQT (480)	Nick Griffin (235)	Dick Griffin (223)	Bonnie Greer (169)	Excellent (76)	No (58)	Question Time (53)	Like (46)	Question (45)	BNP (42)
23:22	572	BBCQT (270)	Nick Griffin (138)	Bonnie Greer (75)	Dick Griffin (67)	Question Time (56)	Excellent (47)	No (37)	BNP (35)	Good (25)	Like (22)
23:23	783	BBCQT (402)	Nick Griffin (146)	Bonnie Greer (82)	No (73)	Question Time (65)	Dick Griffin (61)	Jack Straw (58)	Excellent (48)	BNP (44)	Like (29)
23:24	739	BBCQT (336)	Nick Griffin (183)	Jack Straw (85)	Bonnie Greer (81)	No (80)	Question Time (59)	Excellent (53)	BNP (53)	Dick Griffin (43)	Like (43)
23:25	752	BBCQT (357)	Nick Griffin (157)	Jack Straw (87)	No (66)	Bonnie Greer (56)	Question Time (55)	Excellent (44)	BNP (44)	Bad (35)	Straw (32)

NB. Terms highlighted in red were used as either whole or as parts of search terms when the sample was gathered.

Second, and likely related to Greer's comments, is the rise of a number of very positive terms employed in tweets, including excellent, like and good. An examination of these comments shows that Bonnie Greer was mentioned in 59.4 per cent of these positive tweets. In contrast, Nick Griffin was mentioned in only 12.1 per cent of positive comments. However, a quick examination of these particular tweets finds that they do not actually contain a single positive comment directly on Griffin, but instead are using positive terms about his discomfort at Greer's comments or are celebrating what is claimed to be his lacklustre performance on the programme thus far.

Third, 23:20 sees the emergence of a new meme (that is, an idea or content item spreading rapidly across an online environment). The origins of this are to be found in a question from a member of the audience (who was also a member of an ethnic minority community), which started as an insult, and evolved into a more stinging question:

> **Audience member:** [23:18:26] This is a question to… er…. Dick Griffin, oh… er… beg your pardon Nick.
>
> [Laughter]
>
> **David Dimbleby:** No, no. He's made a mistake.
>
> **Audience member:** You're committed to reversing… er… you're committed to stemming the flow and reversing the flow of immigration into the UK so we revert back to a white Britain. Where do you want me to go? This is my country, I love this country, I'm part of this country. You know what? I was born here, I was educated here. You would be surprised how many people here… we could have a whip round to get you a ticket and your supporters…
>
> [Wild applause]
>
> **Audience members:** … to go to the South Pole. It a colourless landscape, you'll find. [23:19:11]

Comments in the 23:20 sample draw special attention to the slip at the opening of the sequence, with the phrase "Dick Griffin" appearing a total of 233 times during the minute. Aside from indicating the ability to the Viewertariat to laugh at an incident on the screen in much the same manner as the studio audience, it also gives us the chance to understand the way virality works when people are using Twitter to comment on real time events. The emergence of the term is shown in Figure 2. The nature of this viral event is interesting, because the peak level of comments relating to it is in the immediate aftermath, when there are 223 comments using the phrase "Dick Griffin". These figures then rapidly decline. Furthermore, almost all these comments contain original text. It is only as some time passes and the number of comments decreases that retweets start to constitute a greater proportion of the content, although they never amount to anything like a majority.

This might though be an abnormal pattern for the diffusion of topics on Twitter in response to events on the screen, because the incident it referred to was so simple and lent itself to an obvious comment. In contrast, the ten minute sample above indicates that an alternative viral was circulating during this period. This is the hyperlink *Twitpic.com /mie5s*, which leads to a photograph of Nick Griffin at National Front demonstration in the seventies. This is a very different kind of viral as, while obviously related to the content of the programme, it does not so obviously replicate a comment on screen, instead annotating the discussion with extra information. This leads to a very different pattern of information dissemination, with retweets being far more significant, as is shown in Figure 3. Furthermore the distribution of references is very different, with early comments being fairly isolated events, and the content only going viral after it has been circulating for a few minutes. Indeed, the hyperlink is present and already being shared at the very beginning of the programme. However, it is a long time before it starts to feature as one of the most frequently cited terms. This suggests a different model of information production – in this case, a specialist piece of research, outside the bounds of

programme content, has occurred and then gradually been circulated.

Figure 2: Tweets Referencing "Dick Griffin" Comment

■ New content referencing "Dick Griffin" comment ■ Retweets referencing "Dick Griffin" comment
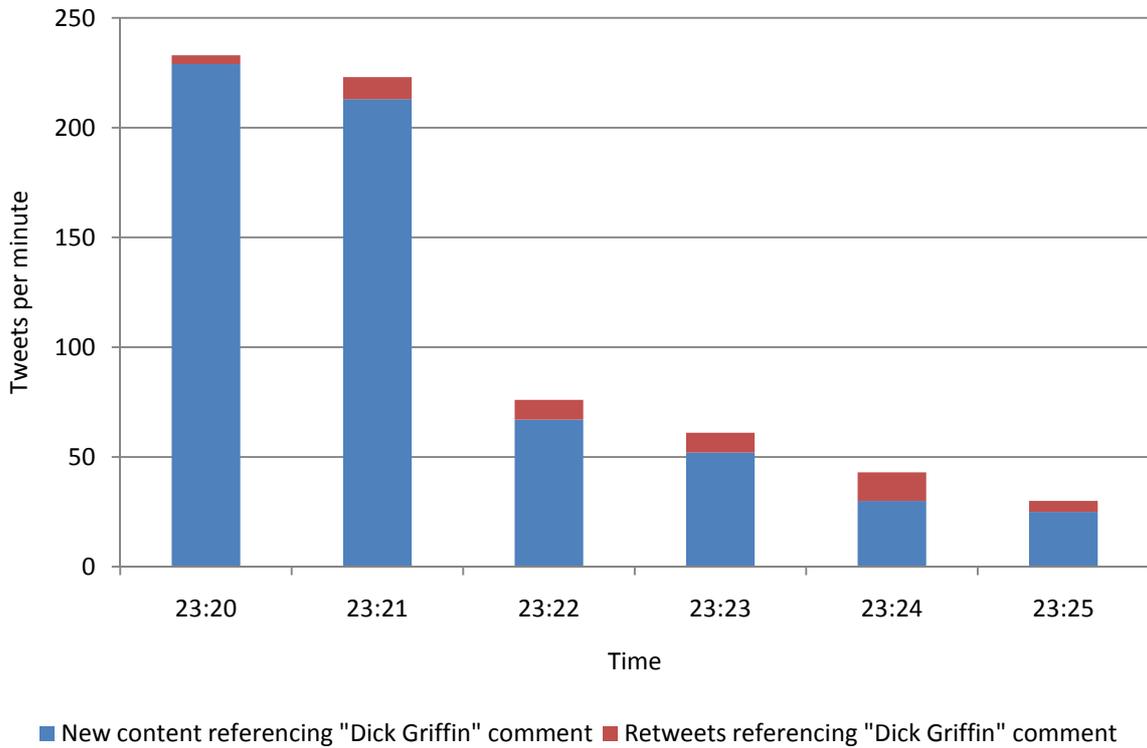
Figure 3: Tweets including hyperlink Twitpic.com/mie5s

■ New content referencing hyperlink ■ Retweets referencing hyperlink
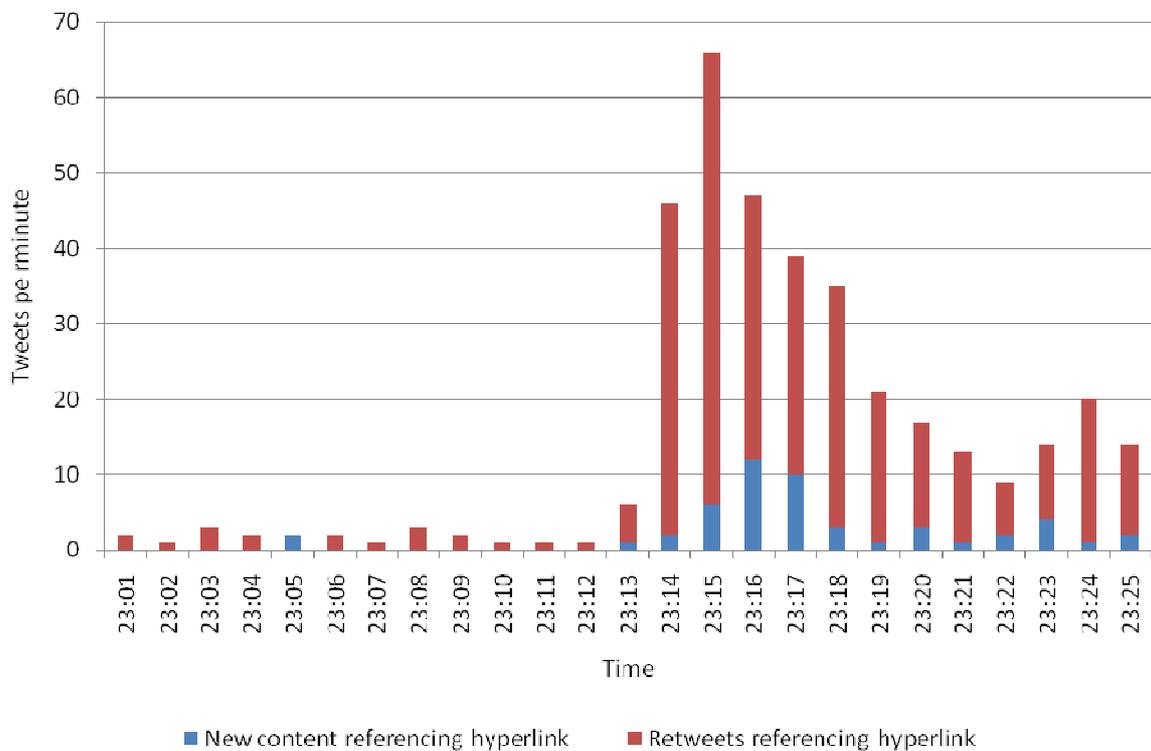
This necessarily requires more effort and knowledge on the part of an individual than quoting an event that occurred on the screen, so it

Developing this analysis

This working paper outlines the very earliest stages of our work, both in terms of using the data from this episode of BBC Question Time and also in developing more general methodologies for understanding real-time viewer participation in broadcast political events. This preliminary analysis suggests the following pathways for further research:

1. *Multimodality*: How do viewers respond to gestures, facial expressions, interpersonal dynamics and other visual cues onscreen? Can facial recognition software enable social scientists to construct automated, systematic tools for such analysis, or should we continue to draw upon interpretive psychological and sociological approaches to microsocial interactions?

2. *Participation*: Can and should media organizations incorporate real-time Viewertariat feedback into the substance of the broadcast itself and what efficacy could such participation have? For some years now media organizations have solicited audience/user feedback, but has this ever shaped the tone or substance of political discussion beyond that originally intended by editors? How could participation through mediated words and talk become connected to political action?

3. *Hierarchy*: Is there, conceptually and empirically, a dichotomy of top-down, institutionally-channeled participation and bottom-up, organic participation? Do new hierarchies form in an emergent manner as individuals with particular content/links or authority/credibility become nodal and are such individuals then incorporated into prior media-political hierarchies?

is not surprising that the information would be passed round in a different way.

4. *Representation*: How do the Viewertariat conceive their own position within a broader audience-cum-public? Are they reflexive about their own particular demographic characteristics vis-à-vis the general population? Do they expect to see their views made present in the broadcast?

5. *Remediation*: How do mainstream media report the Viewertariat in the next day's news? Are the tweets visualized by mainstream media as a selection of the juiciest quotes, as a graph, as a word cloud of most common terms used by the Viewertariat, and so on? Do journalists continue to represent the Viewertariat and its medium of choice (Twitter in this case) either as a fundamentally serious block of the public, or a frivolous and unrepresentative minority presenting entertainment value?

6. *Methodologies*: What tools and techniques allow us to gather, store, analyse and visualize data from one medium and across several media? Alongside problems in any single datastream such as incomplete datasets, fluid grammatical and lexical constructions, and uneven use of clients and applications that shape the characteristics of any tweet, how can textual analysis across parallel multiple datastreams around a specific event be organized and analysed? An event is distributed and dispersed across mainstream news, blogs, YouTube, microblogs, party websites, civil society websites and *that is just online*; can we develop methodologies to explore data concerning offline behaviour around the same event?

Conclusion

As well as offering a preliminary analysis of our sample, this paper raises a great many questions. Two things, however, are certain. First, that interaction through real time digital technology such as microblogging will increasingly be combined with more traditional modes of media consumption to create new dynamics and modes of participation among citizens. Second, these forms of real-time participation in political events present an extraordinary opportunity to explore individuals' political relations, understandings and motivations. We have focused on a BBC Question Time episode in which Nick Griffin, leader of the far right British National Party, appeared and stimulated enormous ratings and interest. The preliminary analysis here indicates the variety of forms of response generated through Twitter, ranging from immediate tweets about Greer's dismissal of Griffin or an audience member's linguistic fumble through to Viewertariat annotation of the programme by retrieving and discussing, as the show developed, a photograph of Griffin from the 1970s. Further analysis could explore whether Viewertariat responses to particular panelists become more or less positive during the broadcast, or during each section of discussion. We could explore whether tweets focus on *what* panelists said or *how* they said it. And as set out in the previous section, there are a number of pathways for developing this field of research. At a time when many researchers are trying to understand emergent communication technologies, such as Twitter, the authors of this paper will continue to put this into practice, further examining this dataset and generating others from different events in the future. Much richer, cross-stream analysis would be required before we could begin to venture conclusions about the impact of, say, the Viewertariat versus any other demographic or actor(s) upon political outcomes such as agenda-setting, framing, persuasion and actual behaviour such as voting.

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