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What social media data means for audience studies: A multi-dimensional investigation of Twitter use during a current affairs TV programme

ABSTRACT

Both practitioners and researchers embrace the increasing volume of digital data to measure and understand audiences. This study focuses on Twitter use during an eminent Belgian current affairs TV program to understand how people talk about television on Twitter. The main objective of the study is to understand how we can interpret these digital traces, and in extension, discuss its utility and value for audience studies. More specifically, we define two validity issues related to the use of social media data; i.e. the technological bias of data analysis and the alleged objectivity of the data. These issues are addressed through the combination of Twitter data and user insights. More specifically, we focus on interaction patterns and the content of Twitter messages in relation to TV content. We compliment these analyses with in-depth interviews with a selection of Twitter users. The results confirm the variations and complexities of the use of digital objects such as the @sign and hashtags. In addition, although Twitter messages are unobtrusive measures, they reflect performances in the sense that they entail interpretations as well as representations of the self and one's program taste. Users predominantly feel the need to scrutinize the actions and utterances of politicians and experts. The use of irony and sarcasm exemplifies the playfulness and fun-factor of these activities. To conclude, we elaborate on the results in relation to the validity issues we put forth and discuss methodological and epistemological concerns related to the role and use of social media data in audience studies and social sciences in general.

KEYWORDS: Twitter; television; audiences; methodology; validity

INTRODUCTION

When conceptualizing and reflecting on the audience concept, we cannot ignore the diffusion of the internet and social media in particular. Publically available and accessible social media data, such as Twitter messages, contribute to the growing interest of both practitioners and media scholars to understand and manage audiences. Concerning television in particular, scholars have studied how microblogging boosts during live TV broadcasts and affects how traditional media forms are experienced (Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2011; A. Bruns & Burgess, 2011; Highfield, Harrington, & Bruns, 2013; Larsson & Moe, 2012). Often, keywords or hashtags (#) organize discussion on a particular program or televised event, and allow us, as researchers, to define and investigate how viewers enhance their television experience. These studies embrace the benefits of unobtrusive measures to understand the meaning making processes that audiences engage in. In this paper, we add a layer of understanding via the combination of digital traces and user insights. We define the challenges of using data gathered via Twitter for audience research.

This paper addresses Twitter talk during multiple episodes of an eminent Flemish current affairs program, called “De Zevende Dag”. In this study, the program content mainly consists of political debates since the episodes under investigation are aired during the campaign of the 2012 local elections in Belgium. Especially during highly politicized times, scholars point to the evolving role of television in relation to social media practices (Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2011; Elmer, 2012). Via real-time contributions, viewers can publically support, refute or ridicule political actors on the television screen. How do these emerging practices alter the way audiences engage with televisual media? Hence, we aim to understand *mediated* meaning making and social use of television. Our analytical approach is innovative in the sense that we

combine behavioral data (i.e. tweets) and user insights (via in-depth interviews). Hence, we apply a narrow but more in-depth focus. Our agenda is two-fold as this study (1) investigates emerging audience practices on Twitter and (2) defines the challenges of Twitter research to understand these practices. In this respect, we contribute to the ongoing debate on audience research methodologies and in extension, the role of big data in social sciences.

We start this paper with an outline of the Flemish current affairs program “De Zevende Dag”. Following, we discuss the current understanding of Twitter as an audience (measurement) technology and put forth two validity issues related to the *mediated nature* of audience practices. The methodology section outlines how the combination of analytical tools (i.e. the combination of behavioral data and user insights) allows us to understand these mediated audience practices. Subsequently, we present the results and discuss the role of social media in audience studies.

“DE ZEVENDE DAG” AND THE FLEMISH TWITTER USER

“De Zevende Dag” is a current affairs program, launched in 1988. It is aired live on the generalist channel of the public service broadcaster VRT, which is the most popular channel in Flanders (i.e. the northern region of Belgium). Introduced as a political discussion program, the show nowadays also covers sports, culture, media and lifestyle. Every Sunday morning at 11 a.m., two hosts invite eminent guests to discuss a selection of news events. The episodes we studied, are aired in the advent of the regional elections in Flanders, hence, mainly consist of debates between political candidates.

In reference to Örnebring (2003), “De Zevende Dag” is defined as a current affairs debate format for the following reasons: (1) the discussion of current socio-economic and political issues in the form of debates or interviews and (2) a contribution to the political life in

Flanders and public opinion formation. Since 2010, the program is co-hosted by prominent political journalists, called Ivan De Vadder and Indra Dewitte (who has been temporarily replaced by Linda De Win during our research period in 2012). The hosts conduct interviews and moderate debates to ensure all parties get fair hearing, thereby disclosing disagreement and discussion rather than consensus. The program is a traditional public service, news-focused format in the sense that citizens do not influence the program content.

Since 2010, the public service broadcaster VRT systematically promotes dedicated hashtags for each of its programs. This fits within a general, multi-media approach to reach and engage audiences, including a program website, a Facebook fan page, a Twitter account and dedicated hashtag.ⁱ The program features on screen prompts of the dedicated hashtag, but Twitter messages are not displayed nor integrated in the program. “De Zevende Dag” has an audience viewing rate of about 12%, but nevertheless scores amongst the most popular Flemish programs on Twitter (Deckmyn, 2012). Hence, without professional conversation management and nonetheless its moderate viewing rates, the program seems to generate a sustainable Twitter audience. Also internationally, similar programs generate substantial Twitter traffic (Anstead & O’Loughlin, 2011; Elmer, 2012; Larsson, 2013).

Based on a representative survey of the Flemish population, we know 27% has a Twitter account (iMinds-iLab.o, 2012). Twitter use is on the rise though (+12,9% compared to 2011), but still lags behind Facebook (62.5%). In addition, we keep in mind that Twitter messages have an audience of readers as well, which significantly multiplies the impact of the messages (Chadwick, 2011). Concerning user profile, the survey indicates that the age group of 20 to 50 makes up about 75% of the Twitter users and male users are overrepresented (64%). Respondents link motivations to use Twitter predominantly to: (1) monitoring news and current affairs (40%) and (2) passing thought and opinion (20%). This profile description links up to the concept of “news junkies” (Prior, 2006), which reflects how the increase of

information on the internet is linked to knowledge concentration amongst the people who like the news.

Below, we discuss existing literature on Twitter as an audience (measurement) technology and we put forth two validity issues related to social media inquiry. We stress the *relative* objectivity of behavioral data and point to the technological bias of Twitter based metrics and analyses. In this respect, we recognize the added value of combining behavioral online data and offline interpretations. Two research questions are put forth that allow us to understand the meaning of these mediated audience practices on an empirical as well as a methodological level.

THE TWEETING AUDIENCE

Via Twitter, audience members engage in virtual, public spaces without transcending the physical boundaries of the living room, in which television consumption is traditionally situated (e.g. Morley, 1980). This raises questions concerning the strategies and methods we should apply to assess the act of audiencing. Below, we discuss how Twitter use in relation to television is currently defined and understood in what is still an emerging field of study (Bredl, Ketzer, Hünninger, & Fleischer, 2014).

Twitter has been defined as a *backchannel* for television, which reflects the reactive nature of Twitter talk as it allows users to provide live commentary on TV shows (Bruns & Burgess, 2011). In similar vein, tweeting viewers during an episode of the political program “BBC Question Time” are referred to as *the viewertariat*, i.e. an engaged and committed segment of the television audience that not only views but simultaneously *reviews* (Anstead & O’Loughlin, 2011). Harrington, Highfield and Bruns (2013) argue that Twitter is more than a backchannel by emphasizing the social in social media. They refer to a *virtual lounge room*, which connects audience members and makes TV viewing an even more communal activity.

The hashtag convention in particular is associated with the creation of a collective entity of users as it allegedly displays the user's visible and deliberate attempt to be part of the group (Deller, 2011; Highfield et al., 2013; Wohn & Na, 2011). In extension, scholars investigated Twitter in relation to the construction of a fan community around particular programs such as "Glee" (Wood & Baughman, 2012) and the Eurovision song contest (Highfield et al., 2013).

In essence, these studies use behavioral online data to understand the social uses and interpretations of televised texts. The (offline) investigation of audiences' uses and interpretations of media is an incumbent field of study. In particular, the use of qualitative (often ethnographic) studies of the audience were able to account for the diversity in audience practices related one's social context (Ang, 1985; Lull, 1990; Morley, 1980). Nonetheless the appeal of digital behavioral data to understand the meaning and use of television, we want to stress its complementarity with the *thick descriptions* that users provide us via *offline* qualitative research. We do this by addressing two validity issues related to the study of social media from an audience research perspective and in social sciences in general.

First, social media data is not objective *as such*. Digital observations provide unbiased data about user behavior *in relation to the communication channel under investigation* but not with regard to human behavior *per se* (Jürgens, 2014). Hence, nonetheless, the abundance of these aggregated utterances, tweets remain snapshots when linked to the individual users. In this study, we do not take into account what they do on other platforms, not to mention, in an offline context. Important here is to enquire what they share on Twitter and how they understand and value these practices. How is meaning making *performed* through Twitter (Papacharissi, 2012)? Does it reflect a particular representation of the self in relation to one's "imagined audience" (Marwick & boyd, 2011)?

Second, the analysis of Twitter is based on digital objects, such as hyperlinks, hashtags and mentions. Although this facilitates the comparison between different studies and eliminates researcher bias (Jürgens, 2014), it exposes us to a *technological* bias. To what extent do we (mis)take a technological structure for a social one? The technical function of digital objects does not always match its appropriation by the users. Concerning hashtags, Bruns and Moe (2014, p. 18) state that if users include topical hashtags in their own tweets, but do not follow other users' hashtagged tweets, 'the primary utility of hashtagging would be negated'. Concerning mentions and replies, we can easily extract these tweets and construct conversation networks but these platform features do not necessarily allow us to 'detect the social in social media' (Marres, 2013).

Below, we put forth two research questions (RQ) that guide our analyses and contribute to our understanding of the role of social media data for audience research. The research questions reflect the combined interpretation of Twitter messages, television content and user insights via in-depth interviews. We apply these questions on the Flemish current affairs program "De Zevende Dag", which we outlined above.

RQ1: How do tweeting viewers communicate about the program via Twitter? This includes (1) the use of Twitter conventions (i.e. replies and mentions) and (2) the content of the hashtagged Twitter messages.

RQ2: How do tweeting viewers define (1) their mediated meaning making practices and (2) their mediated sense of sociality?

RESEARCH DESIGN & RATIONALE

The study combines three data sources (i.e. Twitter messages, TV video footage and in-depth interviews) for (1) a content analysis of Twitter messages, (2) a network analysis of user-user interactions and (3) an analysis of the in-depth interviews. In addition, as will become clear below, we combined these methods on an *integrative* manner. We start with the outline of the collection and analysis of Twitter messages, as this guided the selection of interviewees and the questions they were asked.

Twitter data collection

The Twitter Application Program Interface (API) allows us to capture tweets containing a certain keyword or hashtag using the open-source tool yourTwrapperkeeper (yTK) (Bruns, 2012). Following this procedure, we collected a corpus of 3961 tweets containing the dedicated hashtag (#7dag). This corpus reflects one month of data, i.e. September 2012, and comprises five episodes. We cover a limited period of time, as the focus lies on the combination of behavioral patterns and user perceptions.

We acknowledge the hashtag approach is not an exhaustive data collection method (for a more in-depth discussion, see Bruns & Stieglitz, 2014). We do stress a few particular reasons that support the use of the hashtag in this particular context. First, the hashtag is consistently prompted before and during the program and is widely adopted by “the viewertariat” (Anstead & O’Loughlin, 2011). In addition, we argue that the use of the hashtag reflects the user’s intentional association with the debate on the program (Bruns & Burgess, 2011a; Larsson & Moe, 2012).

A multilayered analysis of Twitter communication patterns

Bruns & Moe (2014) define three modes of information exchange and user interaction on Twitter which can be understood as micro (i.e. @username communication), meso (i.e. follower-followee networks) and macro layers (i.e. hashtagged communication). In this study,

we opt for a multilayered understanding of Twitter communication by focusing on the micro level and the macro level.

The micro level focuses on a particular Twitter convention, i.e. the use of the *@-sign* followed by the addressee's username. Meraz and Papacharissi (2013) refer to this convention as an "addressivity marker", which allows the user to communicate to a specific other user. These mentions can be placed at the beginning of the message (i.e. a reply), within the message (i.e. a mention) or in the form of a retweet and are used to construct a communication network between Twitter users. Hence, only the hashtagged messages that contained an *@-sign* were retained for the construction and analysis of a network of users, using the Social Network Analysis (from now: SNA) software UCINET (Borgatti, Everett, & Freeman, 2002).

Twitter users can apply these micro-level conventions to address other tweeting viewers as well as actors in the program (e.g. the hosts or political actors staged on the TV screen). Therefore, we coded the users that received or sent out more than 10 messages accordingly. More specifically, we defined these users as (1) journalists/media outlets, (2) politicians/parties, (3) established experts or (4) citizens.

These micro-level interactions are embedded in the hashtagged exchanges (i.e. via "#7dag"). In order to understand these macro-layers of communication, we conducted a content analysis. More specifically, we selected Twitter messages and corresponding video footage for three out of the five episodes. A content analysis of these Twitter messages allows us to understand if Twitter messages (1) are attuned to the topics and issues discussed on the TV screen, (2) utter reflections upon the production (format) or the producers/hosts; and last, (3) refer to the act of audiencing or the other tweeting viewers. The categories are mutually exclusive and are applied on the original messages (no retweets) as we focus on the diversity in content rather than the popularity of particular messages.

Put concisely, discussion on the program (RQ1) is understood through the combined analysis of micro and macro modes of communication. Below, we focus on RQ2, i.e. user perceptions on (1) their mediated meaning making practices and (2) their mediated sense of sociality.

A selection of Twitter users for in-depth interviews

In order to complement and enrich our behavioral data, we looked for participants that are well embedded in the discussion, both on the micro and the macro level. So, based on the network analysis, we defined participants that sent *and* received over 10 messages containing an @-sign in the form of replies, mentions or retweets. In addition, participants were ranked on their overall activity (i.e. the number of hashtagged tweets), so we could select amongst the top contributors. Concerning identity, users that have no affiliation with traditional media or the formal political field are retained.

Throughout our solicitation for participants, it became clear that the selection criteria we set mainly apply to male users. We do acknowledge that this could be different if we set different selection criteria (e.g. less active users). The gender imbalance of Twitter use in Flanders (as contextualized above) might be more outspoken for these practices. In addition, the program's target audience influences who is watching, hence, co-determines who is (actively) tweeting during the show. In relation to the research question, we argue that user (inter)activity outweighs the user's gender.

The sample included 12 men, aged 24 to 60 (37 on average). The interviewees vary in family situation, i.e.: single/alone (2), being married/living together (2), being married/living together with children (4), living with parents/family members (4). Aside age and family situation, participants are relatively similar in terms of their cultural background (i.e. higher education, non-manual employment, eloquent speech and well-informed). These actors could be referred to as "news junkies" (Prior, 2006), as they act as well-informed and active watchdogs.

Interview procedure and analysis

The 12 participants took part in a Computer-Assisted Online Interview that lasted about two hours and took place via a platform of the participant's choice (i.e. Skype, Google or Facebook chat). The interview is centered around the use and meaning of Twitter in conjunction with news and current affairs and the "De Zevende Dag" in particular, whereby the participants' Twitter messages were used as stimuli. During the semi-structured interviews, we discuss (1) their mediated meaning making practices and (2) their mediated sense of sociality. We used NVivo to analyze the interviews and interpret the answers of the participants inductively and deductively. We depart for the validity issues and related research questions we defined above and at the same time let them be altered by the data. We translated the tweets and user reflections that are incorporated in the results section from Dutch to English. In addition, the names of the participants are replaced by pseudonyms.

THE TWEETING VIEWER

Detecting the social: Between micro and macro levels of communication

We initially focus on the user-user network, which reflects the micro-level communication patterns for five episodes in September 2012. To analyze and properly visualize the network in UCINET, the users with a degree higher than one (i.e. > one message sent or received) are retained, resulting in a network of 631 users and 2854 ties. We opt for a rather unconventional visualization of the uses-user network, in the sense that we provide a two-dimensional representation of user centrality in the network (see Figure 1). The position the user holds on the graph is defined by the combination of (1) one's in-degree (i.e. number of mentions received) and (2) one's out-degree (i.e. number of mentions sent). This allows us to define who is subject *of* conversation or active *within* the conversation. Based on the added grid lines on Figure 1, we demarcate three different user segment (i.e. [1],[2] and [3]), which can be

meaningfully linked to the identity of the specific users. Users that address or are addressed more than 10 times are colored according to their identity as a formal political actor (politician or political party), a media actor (journalist or media organization), an established expert with regular appearances in the mainstream media or a citizen actor.

<insert Figure 1: A Two-dimensional understanding of user centrality>

Most of the users are situated in the grey segment, which reflects visibility in the debate on a more ad hoc base. It reflects the power law distribution (also called: the long tail), which applies to user activity on social media in general and creates inevitable inequality in engagement (Shirky, 2008). Segment [1] reflects users that take central positions in the debate in the sense that they are subject *of* communication but rarely engage *in* the conversation themselves. It mainly consists of established actors, referring to journalists, politicians or experts. We need to take into account that the construction of the network is based on multiple episodes. Hence, compared to the other guests, the hosts are on screen every week, which contributes to their visibility in the network. Other studies confirm the central positions these established actors occupy in terms of the number of mentions they receive (Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013; Burgess & Bruns, 2011; Larsson & Moe, 2012). Hence, in our communication network, segment [1] reflects *the social* as a performance indicator and for segment [3] this would be an activity indicator. Segment [2] reflects the users that are both active and reactive or recognized by fellow tweeters in the debate, also referred to as “networkers” (Larsson & Moe, 2012). Hence, from the overall communication network, we define a small collective of *interactive* users, which are predominantly citizen actors.

However, based on the interview data, we argue that these patterns reflect a somewhat distorted depiction of the micro-level communication practices. Follow-up conversation on hashtagged tweets is not always captured as users do not include the hashtag in their follow-

up messages (Bruns & Stieglitz, 2014). Based on the interviews, we understand the selective nature of these practices. Aside practical reasons (i.e. the 140-character limit), we noticed that the non-use of the hashtag is related to the user's imagined audience (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Follow-up messages are not always directed at, hence, relevant for, the "De Zevende Dag" audience. As **Mark (M, 20)** states: *You just don't want to read all these conversations taking place between users during those two hours.*

In essence, "second-order" conversations circulate during the program but are *indirectly* linked to the program. We understand them as second-order conversation as they take place beyond the hashtag audience on which we generally tend to focus. Dave compliments Mark's reflection as he elaborates on the selective scope of these messages.

Dave (M, 27): *I try to avoid the use of the hashtag [i.e. #7dag], because a reply message is often very specifically related to a particular person. I mean, when someone replies one of my tweets, saying 'hey, have you read about this or that', this message is not related to the program anymore, so it makes more sense to address me in particular.*

The statement above does not apply for established actors, such as the hosts or politicians shown on the screen. The inclusion of their @names in the hashtagged Twitter messages serves a double purpose, i.e. they are used to talk *about* them and in a second instance, to talk *to* them. In this respect, these Twitter messages are perceived relevant for the entire hashtag audience. Hence, the inclusion or exclusion of the hashtag is different for the different actor types these messages are directed at. In this respect, the communication network we drew, contains an overrepresentation of "talking about" messages (i.e. the use of the @-sign to talk *about* users), which are related to performance rather than "the social" (Marres, 2013).

During the interviews, users indicate that they do not always follow the “#7dag” tweets whilst watching the program, which provides additional support for the idea that the hashtag gathers content (cf. “talking about”) rather than people. They do understand the hashtag is a searchable object and occasionally go beyond their timeline, for example when one of the #7dag tweets appears on one’s timeline through a retweet of a follower. Nonetheless, we argue that the overall network of users participating in the “#7dag” conversation consists of multiple smaller entities (i.e. timelines), largely unaware of one another, yet within a shared public space (as exemplified by Mark’s statement below). The select group of people Mark (M, 24) talks about can be conceptualized as “ideal readers” (Marwick and boyd, 2011), as he sees them as equal in their tweeting behavior during the program.

Mark (M, 24): *I kind of know who is watching and who isn’t, because I notice a lot of people on my timeline are tweeting about the program and we often share opinions within this select group of people. The usual suspects, so to say. We do interact with one another. More specifically, we retweet and reply one another, which - to me - defines a sense of sociality and connectedness.*

Although the hashtag allows us to define and investigate a collection of tweeting viewers, we cannot simply translate this technological infrastructure to a social one. The combination of behavioral patterns and user perceptions shows the analysis of the social is a challenging task, whereby the objective (i.e. network) structure and the subjective experience of the user do not necessarily align. In the following part, we understand how people make sense of televised texts *through* Twitter via the combined interpretation of the Twitter messages, TV program content and user interpretations.

Reflexive performance of the self: On the value of Twitter use

Well before the advent of social network platforms, television is acknowledged as an interactional resource and a supplier of topics for conversation (Lull, 1990; Morrison & Krugman, 2001). Twitter now provides a public arena for these conversations to take place, which affects the nature and dynamics of these conversations. Twitter use whilst watching television is a symbolic practice, i.e. an assertion of one's program taste and playful self-expression. In this respect, we argue that the public association one makes with the program can be linked to the "moral hierarchy" of television programs, i.e. a valued ranking of TV programs (Pertti Alasuutari, 1992; Pertti Alasuutari, 1996). Although we acknowledge not all program choice is selective and self-reflexive, participants spontaneously evaluate particular TV programs through classifications, justifications and explanations, resulting in a "moral hierarchy" of television programs. Based on this moral hierarchy of TV programs (Alasuutari, 1996), in which news and current affairs are on top and soap operas at the bottom, we understand how people discuss the use of Twitter in relation to television. Below, we provide a brief quote that shows the selective character of these practices in relation to the TV program's position in the moral hierarchy. Walter spontaneously gives an excuse for his Twitter use during a "low brow" show. Such excuses are not provided for the program we discuss here.

Walter (M, 35): *Concerning entertainment programs? I admit that - in an unguarded moment - I do tweet about "The Voice" [reality TV/Talent show].*

As we further argue, not only the act of viewing but also the use of Twitter in relation to the program is morally valued, which is reflected in the presentation and content of the message. Visible associations with the program (via the hashtag) trigger the users' self-awareness, which becomes clear when they reflect upon their Twitter messages. Below, we provide an extract from one of the interviews, in which the interviewee was confronted with one of his tweets.

Interviewer: *This is one of your Twitter messages: ‘An addendum to Meyrem Almaci [a politician]: the Glass-Steagall Act was recalled in 1999 under the presidency of Bill Clinton #banks #7dag’ [Original, in Dutch: Aanvulling bij Meyrem Almaci: de Glass-Steagall Act werd in 1999 herroepen in de VS, onder president Bill Clinton dus #banken #7dag]*

Matthias (M, 24): *Haha, what a nerd tweet, but it is true!*

Interviewer: *What do you mean “nerd tweet”?*

Matthias (M, 24): *I mean, who knows the Glass-Steagall Act?*

Interviewer: *So why did you share it?*

Matthias (M, 24): *Well, it’s actually about the image that Flemish people have about politics in the U.S.. They think Democrats are good and Republicans are bad. I would vote for the Democrats in the U.S. as well but those stereotypes bother me. Also... maybe, I wanted to show this is part of my common knowledge ;-). All is vanity :-).*

There are a few interesting aspects in this respondent’s rhetoric on which we elaborate below. First, the interviewee allegedly ridicules his contribution; ‘haha, what a nerd tweet’. Another related answer is: *Apparently... I mainly use it to spread bullshit (Steve, M, 34)*. Participants ascribe a certain triviality to their tweeting practices, which is in contrast with the number of messages they send out every episode. This pattern is very similar for the tone of their messages in the sense that they question or disagree with what is said in the program (see also above: Matthias, M, 24) or in extreme cases even consider it utter nonsense (see below: Dave, M, 27), yet value to report about it.

Dave (M, 27): *About 99% of the time, they don’t have anything to say that I believe or that I don’t know yet.*

Interviewer: *So why do you watch then? ;-)*

Dave (M, 27): *Just to tweet! :-)*

Twitter behavior seems paradoxical in the sense users are motivated to tweet *but* they marginalize their practices. In addition, they are mainly driven from a kind of disdain or disagreement with what is being discussed in the program. Utterances often stem from criticism for and/or denunciation of the incumbent political organization (Rosanvallon, 2008). However, this seems to be an end as such rather than a means for political change as Rosanvallon alludes to. The interviewees acknowledge their influence on the debate (or the political agenda in particular) remains limited, but they do not expect or call for profound changes. Reflections on TV are fun; they make TV watching an amusing activity. The two quotes below exemplify the playful performance of the self in the particular context of Twitter (Papacharissi, 2012). The 140-character limit makes users very conscious upon the formulation of the message.

Bart (M, 47): [after confronting him with his own Twitter message]. *It is a rhetorical question, directed at nobody actually. It is just a cynical remark in the form of question, without actually being a question. It is way of writing to utter criticism. With only 140 characters to get noticed, you have to be creative. That's why I like to formulate things a bit differently.*

Gert (M, 44): [after confronting him with his own Twitter message]. *It is just for fun actually, but the tweet also wants to convey that politician is making a fool of himself. I know a fact-based discussion would be better, but I am allowed to have some fun, right? Hence, the tone of the message is often cynical or sarcastic ;-).*

Triviality, creativity and irony go hand in hand with the presentation of one's expertise, knowledge or opinion on the issues as debated on television. Here, we present the findings of our content analysis (see Table 1) and how they relate to the statements of the interviewees.

The categories are the following: (1) the actors, their arguments and issues discussed in the program (i.e. program content), (2) the moderation of the debates and the choice of the actors and the topics (i.e. program format) and (3) the act of audiencing and the other tweeting viewers (i.e. audience).

<insert Table 1: Categories of the Twitter messages>

As Table 1 shows, most of the Twitter messages are references to the discussants and the topics. In other words, rather than just stating: ‘Hi, I am (not) watching #7dag today’, users make indirect associations with the act of viewing via their expertise or critical opinion on the topics (which is also reported by the interviewees above). Hence, witty written, issue- or actor-based tweets, which initiate from a ‘You ain’t fooling me’ attitude towards these political actors or experts, are highly valued. Aside political debates, “De Zevende Dag” devotes about one third of its time to sports, culture, media and lifestyle topics. Remarkably, none of the participating Twitter users is motivated to discuss these topics. Whereas sports events (e.g. football games) often yield sustainable Twitter traffic, users do not discuss these topics here. In “De Zevende Dag”, the political debates take the form of discussions, led by the political journalists that seek for quarrel rather than consensus. The presentation of sports, lifestyle and media is very different in the sense that it consists of a weekly digest of related events, whereby the guests *talk* about these events rather than discussing them. Hence, the lack of interest or motivation to discuss these issues is related to the format rather than the content as such.

As the second category in Table 1 shows, users rarely engage in meta talk on the program (e.g. the choice of the topics that are discussed or the politicians that are invited). Hence, they mainly follow the agenda put forth by the mass media. They go beyond the media as an

institute, the program makers and format and mainly co-discuss the discussions or as **Frank (M, 60)** states: *It's like you virtually become part of the debate.*

Last, we would like to address the final and smallest category of messages in Table 1, i.e. the tweets that cover the act of audiencing (e.g. 'I am watching') or the other users tweeting about the program. As discussed above, the interviewees indicate that they are no regular viewers of the hashtagged Twitter debate. Hence, it comes to no surprise that there are very little references to the other tweeting viewers. Moreover, as we discussed above, interactions between users can take place *beyond* the hashtag debate. In addition, for the two last categories of our content analysis, we can argue that these "rapid responses" (Elmer, 2012) urge people to discuss what they see and hear on the television, rather than the social setting in which these utterances take place and the format in which these discussions are staged. Nonetheless, the interviewees do point to the conscious act of discussing, scrutinizing and interrogating the doings of these eminent guests. Hence, both cultural and social conventions as well as technological features shape the nature of these mediated practices. Below, we define and discuss a number of particularities related to social media research and critically reflect upon its meaning and use for audience studies.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This study investigates Twitter use during a Flemish current affairs program "De Zevende Dag" to understand how people make sense of television *through* Twitter. We apply a case-study approach to provide an in-depth understanding of mediated viewership in relation to news and current affairs, and political debates in particular. The focus of this paper is to critically examine whether and how audience research (especially qualitative studies) can be applied on Twitter data. Although online data extraction opens up new windows for audience studies, the understanding of their limits and weaknesses is still open. In this respect, we put

forth two validity issues related to (1) the technological bias inherent to these digital tools and (2) the performative and selective nature of these digital utterances. To discuss these issues, we rely on the confrontation of manifest behavior with the singularities of human interpretation. Below, we elaborate on these validity issues and outline directions for the debate on online data collection and analysis for audience research.

Although digital measures eliminate observer influences, we cannot simply assume that the replacement of the observer with these automated tools results in an increase in validity. The concept of “hyper-coding” (Vittadini & Pasquali, 2014) is of interest here and originates from a discussion on virtual shadowing, i.e. a method that combines multiple data sources such as interviews, diaries or pictures. The concept of hyper-coding reflects the need to understand these online practices as “hyper-performative” research materials. As we discussed above, these Twitter messages are reflections but also performances of the self. The status and characteristics of these data sources makes them very different from people’s offline meanings, interpretations and conversation (e.g. via in-depth interviews/ethnographic approaches). In this study, we relate performance to (1) the value of the program and (2) the socio-technological structures through which these practices occur. Concerning the former, we believe it is valuable to build upon our current knowledge on television audiences, such as Alasuutari’s (1992) moral hierarchy of TV programs. The audiences’ reflexive and critical *evaluations* of their viewing behavior in an offline context extend towards the practice of Twitter use whilst viewing, hence, co-define the content and the tone of the messages. Future research on Twitter and television needs to understand the existing cultural conventions that people use in their discourses about TV programs and how this migrates online. In addition, Alasuutari (1999) suggests that “third generation” audience studies need to understand how viewers go *beyond* media content, as they also reflect upon media institutes, their reality claims and the act of being an audience member. As we found in this study, these utterances

do not occur online. Hence, we would systematically miss out important aspects of the viewer's narrative on the role of media in everyday life in favor of these rapid and reactive responses on media content.

Concerning Twitter as a socio-technological structure, we understand how its affordances co-define the nature and dynamics of talk on television. As our participants alluded to, the brevity of the messages, their real-time nature and virtuality co-define the nature of these practices. In addition, they are illustrative of larger socio-cultural trends. In a critical essay on our digital media culture, Miller (2008) builds upon Malinowski's (1923) concept of *pathic communication* to understand how communication via social media has a social function rather than an intention to carry information or substance. Although we do acknowledge Twitter messages as reflections on television content, they also fit within 'a (cynical) strategy of impression management to the outside world' (Miller, 2008, p. 389), which is characteristic for social media communication in a general sense. Hence, understanding these mediated practices from a traditional audience studies perspective is highly valuable but not sufficient.

Miller (2008) argues we move towards a conceptualization of the social in terms of tools and technologies rather than a group of humans, which relates to the second validity issue we defined; i.e. the exposure to technological bias. In this respect, Manovich (2001) refers to a *database logic*, which is related to the digitization of media and the growth in information brought by the web and defines how we make meaning out of the world. A database is defined as a structured collection of separate, yet related items, organized for computer management. In this database, each of the items has the same significance. In this respect, we recall the concept of hyper-coding and argue that it not only reflects the performative aspect of these digital utterances, but can also be related to this database logic, in which items have the same meaning. For this study, we particularly think of the use and meaning of the @sign and the hashtag. The latter is essentially a means to collect and store data; it does not indicate

a collective entity of users *per se*. Otherwise stated, analysis and conceptualization cannot precede data collection. In extension, there is a potential mismatch between “objective structures” (or meta-views of these communication structures which are not perceivable as such by the users) and “subjective experiences” (or the way users perceive communication and interaction). In general, we cannot mistake the *amount* of available data for the *variety* of research questions we can answer. We refer to the lack of context, e.g. socio-demographic descriptions (Baym, 2013) as well as other interesting social media data; i.e. reading other users’ hashtagged messages.

We propose a final interpretation of the concept of “hyper-coding”, as we recall the insignificance users attribute to their utterances on politicians and societal issues. We come to wonder how to value these social media texts within democracy. In this respect, we question whether viewers can be conceptualized as citizens, reflecting engaged, informed and participating agents (Livingstone, 2005). More specifically, we refer to Couldry’s (2010) critical essay on the value of *voice* in contemporary democracy and the role of new media technologies therein. These social media technologies provide opportunities to express their dissatisfaction with government, but can they be valued in the policy making process? We revise an earlier reference to Rosanvallon’s (2008) concept of surveillance and oversight, of which denunciation (or criticism) is a primary model. For now, we can state that Twitter users call for criticism *without consequence*, as they feel the need to utter their discontents but do not expect of call for particular changes or actions based upon their utterances. This relates to the fact that these utterances are reflections as well as representations of the self.

In general, the discussion unfolded a number of particularities related to the use of social media data for audience studies (and social sciences in general). To conclude, we argue that we need to push the debate beyond the advantages and limitations of the social media (in relation to the existing methodological toolbox) towards and *ontological* and *epistemological*

understanding of these digital objects and the data structures in which they are embedded. Do we understand the way these digital objects and pre-ordered data structures model the world? Manovich (2001) refers to the concept of “transcoding”, which reflects the translation of information from one layer, i.e. the computer layer (reflecting the *database logic* we discussed) to another, i.e. the cultural layer (i.e. the socio-cultural meaning and categories). In extension, theorization of digital media as objects and methods, as well as critical empirical analysis of these new media objects in everyday life, is needed.

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¹ Program webpage: <http://www.een.be/programmas/de-zevende-dag>, Facebook fanpage: <https://www.facebook.com/dezevendedag?fref=ts>, Twitter account: <https://twitter.com/dezevendedag>