

Audiences as Publics. Tweeting with the Television on.

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Abstract

Watching and talking about television is no longer a private experience confined to the living room. This paper presents a study on Twitter conversation whilst watching television and discusses the findings in the ongoing debates on Twitter research. Via a multi-method approach, we investigate Twitter conversation on a Belgian current affair program. Through the interpretation of the public character of meaning-making, we acknowledge how viewers come to constitute publics. In addition, specific ethical and theoretical issues related to the study are defined and discussed. Via the description of practical examples, we contribute to the ongoing discussion on internet research and Twitter research in particular. Future endeavors are outlined to grasp and understand audience activity in this media manifold.

Keywords

Twitter; television; audiences; publics; ethics

Introduction

In this paper, we would like to connect insights of a study on Twitter conversation whilst watching television with the ongoing debate about Twitter research. We start with the discussion of Twitter conversation during a news and current affairs programs, primarily situated within the field of audience research. Next we will address ethical and theoretical questions we encountered during the study and put forward opportunities and challenges for future research on (Twitter) audiences.

Understanding audiences as publics. Watching and talking about television.

Introduction

When conceptualizing and reflecting on audiences, we cannot ignore the diffusion of the internet and social media, i.e. YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, constituting the era of 'mass self-communication' (Castells, 2009). The presence of networked devices reconfigures our conventional understanding of the living room, which no longer refers to a private place but interweaves multiple configurations of the public and the private (Papacharissi, 2010). Watching and talking about television is no longer confined to the living room. The meshing of mainstream media and online platforms (notably Twitter) is a clear factor in promoting (audience) participation (Dahlgren, 2009). Consequently, we come to wonder under what conditions viewers, i.e. audiences, become publics (Livingstone, 2005). Publics go beyond the act of reception, acting upon their identities as citizens and the collective production of meaning (ibid.). It is indeed both individual and group identity that are at stake for the development of the self in democratic culture (van Dijck, 2009).

This contribution focuses on a popular current affairs program in Flanders, the Northern region of Belgium and home of the Dutch-speaking community. De program is called 'De Zevende Dag' and is aired every Sunday morning on the Flemish public service broadcaster, VRT. The format provides a space for current social phenomena and issues to be discussed in the form of debates or interviews.

Method

The research presented combines a content analysis of Twitter conversation (September 2012) and twelve Computer-Assisted Online Interviews (CAOI's) with Twitter users (October 2012). The

Twitter messages were harvested during three consecutive episodes by making use of the Twitter Streaming API, which resulted in a body of 1449 messages containing the official hashtag ('#7dag') of the program. The analysis centered on what was said (*topic*) and how it was said (*tone*). In addition, twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with the most active Twitter users, which allow contextualization and validation of the findings of the content analysis.

Findings

Viewer talk on television is very much attuned to the content and timing of the specific debates and interviews with policy makers/politicians and experts. Via the Twitter conventions (@replies, hashtags) as well as the audiences Twitter users envision, we are able to capture a sense of collectivity related to this mediated participation in democracy. We acknowledge volatile and liquid interaction patterns, illustrated and enhanced by the use of additional hashtags, which fragment and extend the '#7dag' audience constellation. In a conceptual endeavor to rethink political activity, Rosanvallon (2008) points to 'the democracy of oversight'. In this respect, the Twitter platform favorably impacts the visibility of the attentive and vigilant citizen. The intent to influence political action takes no explicit form, but remains limited to (indirect) forms of communication with politicians and other stakeholders in mind. Message content reflects creative, playful and performative use of television text, based on the 'raw material' of broadcasting television content (Prior, 2006) and often with a critical or skeptical tone. This exploratory study of Twitter conversation on televised debates about societal issues evokes a number of ethical as well as theoretical questions, which we will address in the second part of the paper.

Understanding audiences as publics. Research notes.

Ethical reflections

The publically available data, of which we made use here, raises ethical questions, related to the fuzzy boundaries between private, personal and public data. Aside the collection and processing of this publically available content, we would like to reflect upon publication, i.e. the integration of Twitter messages in our results. In this respect, we contribute to the ethical awareness and reflexivity of internet research, situated around the 'public/private' and 'data/persons' issues.¹

Researching 'large' data sets of tweets inclines us to see 'data' instead of 'persons', which obviously influences how we interpret the 'public/private' delineation. Through the execution of interviews, the person behind the message becomes prominent as well as the idea that what is private and what is public possibly means different things to different people. Building upon previous scholarship, within the context of qualitative audience research, by default, participant's real names are not mentioned in the paper. Obviously, those declarations are made in a private constellation, whereas Twitter messages could be said to have a more public character. Nonetheless, participants remain unaware of the researchers' attention and researchers are not amongst users' 'imagined audience' (Marwick & boyd, 2011). All participants accepted the publication of their usernames and are aware of the public character of their utterances and their reach beyond the platform. We question to what extent these insights to reflect the whole community and the feasibility of such context-based approaches.

Theoretical reflections

The theoretical frameworks and perspectives we argue for, are not always in line with the methodological set-up at hand. In particular, we would like to address the problem of the obfuscated identity of the 'Twitter user', which might have multiple accounts, no accounts but access the web or use Twitter without actively contributing (boyd & Crawford, 2012). Although we focus on theoretical

¹ Based on the AoIR ethical decision making document, 2012. <http://aoir.org/reports/ethics2.pdf>, accessed March 2013.

issues here, the lack of insight in the user's identity also creates difficulties in terms of the implementation of ethical guidelines.

We have to re-negotiate this hashtag-based approach and look for alternatives to map out the Twittersphere. Especially concerning the cross-media approach we put forth here, national media have national publics, hence, match with a national Twitter public. A mixed-method approach as well as more advanced technological tools are put forth here, in which collaboration with computer scholars and non-academic stakeholders is prominent. First, audience activity is also measured by conventional standards, viewing rates, activity but preferably also the composition of the audience can be compared. A particular case study in cooperation with the Flemish public service broadcaster VRT, is currently set up to match viewing rates of specific programs with Twitter traffic. Second, an approach towards the definition of the Belgian Twittersphere suggests a complex combination and computation of meta-data (e.g. hashtags, language, followers/following) for which interdisciplinary work which computer scholars is needed. In particular, the interviewees reported a systematic lack of hashtag use in @replies to other users, pointing to a structural pitfall of the hashtag-based approach. In addition, the fallacy of 'the hashtag audience', or the question to what extent we created rather than captured an audience, suggests the meta-data used here possibly simplified what could be more complex interaction processes. The definition of a user base also permits a socio-demographic understanding, which will enhance the theoretical power of our research.

Conclusion

Based on a case study and the discussion of practical issues, we contribute to the current and future understanding of audiences in contemporary media constellation and the challenges and opportunities it presents.

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