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‘THERE’S A STARMAN WAITING IN THE SKY’: MOURNING DAVID #BOWIE ON TWITTER

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Extended Abstract

This contribution analyses the Twitter response to the death of musician and popular culture icon David Bowie as an inroad to discuss key characteristics and functions of Twitter in the mediated relationships between celebrities, fans and the popular culture industry.

Social media, including Twitter, have become key players in the mediated, parasocial relationships between celebrities and audiences. Twitter allows celebrities to communicate (seemingly) directly, intimately and authentically with audiences and fans (Marwick & boyd, 2011), and provides the latter with tools to discuss celebrity news and to engage in fan behaviour (Van den Bulck et al. 2014). This role is exacerbated in the case of a celebrity death, when Twitter and other social media seems to create a space for people to come together to grieve and mourn the deceased, as illustrated by studies into social media response to the death of Michael Jackson (Hoe-Lian Goh and Sian Lee 2011), Steve Jobs (Holiman, 2013) and Amy Winehouse (Lansdall-Welfare et al., 2012).

However, several critical questions remain unanswered. First, it is unclear how and to what extent reactions on Twitter constitute a conversation and a community (Honeycutt & Herring, 2009) or simply a mass of individual reactions. Second, beyond a rudimentary insight into iGrieve as involving exchange of information and expression of emotions (Hoe-Lian Goh and Sian Lee 2011), relatively little is known about the types of emotions

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and the types of fan creativity these Twitter reactions present, themselves indicative of the depth of a celebrity-fan (parasocial) relationship. Finally, little or no research has looked into the composition of these iMourners. Is this iCommunity of mourners reflective of a 'Twitter of the masses' as or is it in fact directed by a popular culture industry-related elite, reflective of a level of commodification of mourning (Kyllonen, 2010).

These questions will be developed theoretically by taking inspiration from Twitter research, celebrity studies, fan studies and the political economy of the popular culture industry. The research questions will then be addressed empirically through analysis of Twitter data. Following similar studies (e.g. Hoe-Lian Goh and Sian Lee 2011), we collected all tweets with #Bowie in the first 48 hours after Bowie passed away (11/1/16-13/1/16) (N=252 318) by means of the Texifter service which allows for full historical access to the archives upheld by Twitter itself through their subsidiary Gnip. Keeping in mind Wu et al.'s (2011, 4) claim that 'less than 0.05% of users attract almost 50% of all attention in Twitter' (2011, 4) and Mahrt and Scharkow (2013, 20) advice that 'researchers need to consider whether the analysis of huge quantities of data is theoretically justified', we opted for the assessment of a series of variables related to top Twitter users in the data set with the highest degrees of retweets. As such, every tweet that had been redistributed more than 100 times was made subject for analysis (N=130).

These 130 tweets were analysed by means of a quantitative content analysis focusing on variables detailing the user behind the tweet and content of the tweet. A coding schedule was designed based on previous analyses of twitter content (Larsson & Moe, 2012), on iMourning of a celebrity death (e.g. Holiman, 2013), on fandom and fan activity (e.g. Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998), on parasocial relationships with celebrities (Claessens & Van den Bulck, 2014) and on the political economy of popular culture (Kyllonen, 2010). As such, tweets were gauged for textual, visual and audio-visual content, for sentiments – ranging from anger over the passing to messages focusing on Bowie's musical legacy – and for expressions of (para)social relationships. All 130 tweets were coded by both authors. Finally, the twenty most retweeted tweets were submitted to a qualitative analysis for in-depth understanding of the user behind and the content of the tweet.

Preliminary results indicate, first, that 55% of all tweets collected between January 11th and January 13th (i.e. 137 950 of 252 318) were retweets. This relatively high number confirms a Twitter trend noticed in election studies. For instance, 33 % of tweets sent during the 2010 Swedish elections were retweets, compared to 60 % in 2014 (Larsson, 2014). This begs to reconsider the suggestions from the early years of Twitter when use was thought to develop into more conversational modes (cf. Honeycutt & Herring, 2009). Second, the results show a limited number of tweets being retweeted exceptionally often, suggesting there is something of a Twitter elite taking the lead in the Twitter mourning. This elite, third, seems to consist predominantly of media figures, celebrities, artists and people from the music industry. The latter counters much research into fan studies that focus on the 'bottom' up' and resistive forces of fans rather than on the commodification aspect of the popular culture industry. This finding may also explain, fourth, the relative absence of expressions of strong parasocial

relationships, as the dominant tweets are not from ordinary fans. These findings do not contradict, fifth, the notion of Twitter providing a mediated coming together of mourners, looking for recognition of loss and expressions of support. Indeed, content analysis of the tweets suggest a strong focus on positive affirmation in tribute to his work, next to information and emotions of grief. Results will be further analysed and discussed in this light.

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