

# Appropriating breaking news? The evolving Twitter coverage of the Lance Armstrong doping scandal

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## Abstract

Social media have been researched for their roles in, separately, breaking, and sharing news, in engaging with celebrities and public figures, and in providing a backchannel for commenting on media events. In this paper, the confluence of these roles is examined, within the context of one long-running celebrity crisis: the doping allegations against U.S. cyclist Lance Armstrong in 2012, culminating in his confession in televised interviews in January 2013. The keyword “Armstrong” was tracked on Twitter between August 2012 and March 2013, providing a dataset covering several key developments in this story and their social media responses, from live-tweeting during interviews to immediate reactions to sudden news. The analysis of this dataset provides an important examination of how breaking news is shared, editorialized, reframed, and lampooned on Twitter, and the roles and types of users involved in the coverage of these different aspects to the Armstrong story.

## Keywords

Social media; breaking news; celebrity practice;

## Introduction

Twitter has become an important tool for the immediate release and propagation of news as it happens; news organizations and journalists are active on Twitter – and in some cases, have lengthy lists of followers – and while breaking news is not their only use of Twitter, the short message style of tweets lends itself to quick updates which can be instantly disseminated (Vis, 2013). These capabilities are, of course, also available to other Twitter users; if the stream of tweets responding to breaking news acts as “a first draft of the present, to be revised and completed as further information comes to hand” (Bruns & Highfield, 2012), this is, in a sense, a contested draft. Social media provide not only the opportunity for users to react to breaking news, but also to challenge portrayals, share their own interpretations and presentation of stories, and to make these ideas public and, potentially, widely circulated.

While social media are a constantly available platform for breaking and tracking news, providing a site for ‘ambient journalism’ (Hermida, 2010), the type of news event has some bearing on its resulting coverage, attention, and prominent accounts acting as opinion leaders or information brokers on Twitter. Unforeseen or fleeting events and announcements, for example, may be released by journalists with first access to the story. For the coverage of unfolding stories, though, increased access to key elements, such as televised interviews, enables other, non-journalist Twitter users to potentially lead or reframe the coverage – including providing revised treatments of stories through satire, and merging multiple news stories, tangentially related, to create new commentary (the place of humor in tweets, including those by journalists, on news stories, and during media events, is discussed in part by An, Cha, Gummadi, & Crowcroft, 2011; Deller, 2011; Highfield, Harrington, & Bruns, 2013; Holton & Lewis, 2011; Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2012).

## Context

This paper examines the development and appropriation of breaking news within the context of one overall story, and specifically compares the coverage of different aspects of this story as it developed.

In August 2012, the United States Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) stripped the retired U.S. cyclist Lance Armstrong of his titles and results following an inquiry into doping during his professional career – charges denied but not appealed by Armstrong, who later confessed to doping in televised interviews with Oprah Winfrey in January 2013. While ostensibly a topic of interest only to sports fans, the Armstrong case took a higher profile due to his individual fame, achievements, and his personal story in undergoing cancer treatment before successfully returning to professional cycling.

The coverage of Armstrong and doping from August 2012 onwards takes into account a number of individual events contributing to the wider story. The analysis for this paper then examines how these events provoke different responses within the social media coverage of the ongoing story, providing important information into how breaking news is shared, editorialized, and reframed on Twitter, and the types of users involved at different stages of the Armstrong discussion.

### **Methods and analysis**

The analysis here draws on an archive of 5.6 million tweets collected between 24 August and 1 March 2013, based on the keyword “Armstrong” and collected using the *yourTwrapperKeeper* tool (Bruns & Liang, 2012). The Armstrong dataset includes tweets including this term, tweets from and to users named Armstrong, and tweets with URLs containing the term. This provides an unfocused raw dataset, covering tweets not just about or by Lance Armstrong, but also unrelated Armstrongs; for example, the archive includes tweets about the astronaut Neil Armstrong, whose death on 26 August received extensive Twitter attention.

The data are analyzed further using scripts developed for the processing of large Twitter datasets (Bruns & Burgess, 2011), filtering tweets based on such criteria as keywords, timeframe, hashtags, and reply type. A topical network approach is employed to identify and examine different spikes and themes within the overall dataset (Highfield, 2012), comparing the patterns of tweeting and the network of users involved at different stages of the Armstrong discussion.

### **Research questions**

This research seeks to provide an examination of breaking news on Twitter within the context of one, ongoing story, focusing on the following research questions:

What types of news events provoke spikes in attention?

Do different types of news events foster different styles of coverage? Are different types of users (such as journalists, celebrities, and comedians) more or less prominent within the discussion networks formed during these individual spikes?

The analysis focuses first on the overall dataset, measuring the number of tweets per day to identify periods of heightened Twitter activity. These spikes are then examined individually; tweets are filtered based on the timeframe of each spike, and also for relevant keywords. Within each spike, overall metrics are obtained regarding the volume of tweets, the total contributing users, and the distribution of hashtags within these tweets. Reply information is also extracted, aiding the analysis to not only identify which Twitter users are cited most often by others, but also any topical distribution across this network; one comment might be retweeted thousands of times, for example, but it might be on a different aspect of the story, and the users concerned separate, to those found in other tweets within the same spike.

### **Preliminary findings**

Initial findings from the analysis so far suggest that the social media audience – including the users publishing and involved in these stories – does take different roles and approaches to tweeting about breaking news, based on the type of event and the amount of forewarning. The major spike within the

Armstrong dataset, for example, concerns not Lance Armstrong, but the immediate reaction to the death of Neil Armstrong. This unforeseen event was accompanied by a mass outpouring of appreciation for the late astronaut, in addition to sharing the breaking news, and the general tone for the most retweeted comments remained informational (including republishing mainstream media tweets) and respectful.

In comparison, the tweets posted, and retweeted, during Lance Armstrong's interviews with Oprah take a very different tone; in particular, the most retweeted comments are for the most part satirical or of humorous intent, with comedians and media personalities as focal accounts. This may be in part because of the more predictable content of the interviews, as there was an expectation that Armstrong would admit to doping during his career at some point in the broadcast. These cases then suggest different approaches to social media commentary on breaking news; the instinctive, spontaneous reactions to sudden developments, such as the death of Neil Armstrong, and the more communal, spectatorial live-tweeting during televised broadcasts such as the Oprah interviews.

Further work for this paper will examine the discussion of – and by – celebrity accounts, including patterns around @mentions of @lancearmstrong throughout the dataset. This analysis will then provide additional information about the roles and presence of public figures within social media discussions, building on ideas about celebrity practices and interactions raised by Marwick and boyd (2011). In addition, the topical analysis will continue to investigate further the various themes covered within the spikes in Armstrong-related discussion, and the longevity of these themes and individual tweets, as a means of determining the patterns surrounding breaking, and framing, news on Twitter.

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## Oscar Pistorius and the death of Reeva Steenkamp: mapping public opinions on Twitter using frame analysis and data mining

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### Abstract

This paper uses innovative content analysis techniques to map how the death of Oscar Pistorius' girlfriend, Reeva Steenkamp, was framed on Twitter conversations. Around 1.5 million posts from a two-week timeframe are analyzed with a combination of syntactic and semantic methods. This analysis is grounded in the frame analysis perspective and is different than sentiment analysis. Instead of looking for explicit evaluations, such as “he is guilty” or “he is innocent”, we showcase through the results how opinions can be identified by complex articulations of more implicit symbolic devices such as examples and metaphors repeatedly mentioned. Different frames are adopted by users as more information about the case is revealed: from a more episodic one, highly used in the very beginning, to more systemic approaches, highlighting the association of the event with urban violence, gun control issues, and violence against women. A detailed timeline of the discussions is provided.

### Keywords

pistorius; twitter; frame analysis; data mining; public opinion

### Introduction

On the 14th of February 2013, the world got shocked by the breaking news: the South African athlete Oscar Pistorius, the "blade runner", had allegedly shot dead his girlfriend, the model Reeva Steenkamp. Pistorius remarkable story made such an incident not only a major breaking news, but also a very unexpected and controversial one. He claimed that he had awakened early in that morning and heard a noise coming from the bathroom. Mistaking Reeva for an intruder, he shot four times through the bathroom door and only after he realized that his girlfriend was not lying on the bed. Pistorius did not claim that he had not shot her; he assumed he did it, but assured he had no intention of killing Reeva. He was charged with murder and bailed eight days later. This paper maps how people talked about the case on Twitter and how they evaluated the incident as more information came up in the following days.

### *Perspective and methods*

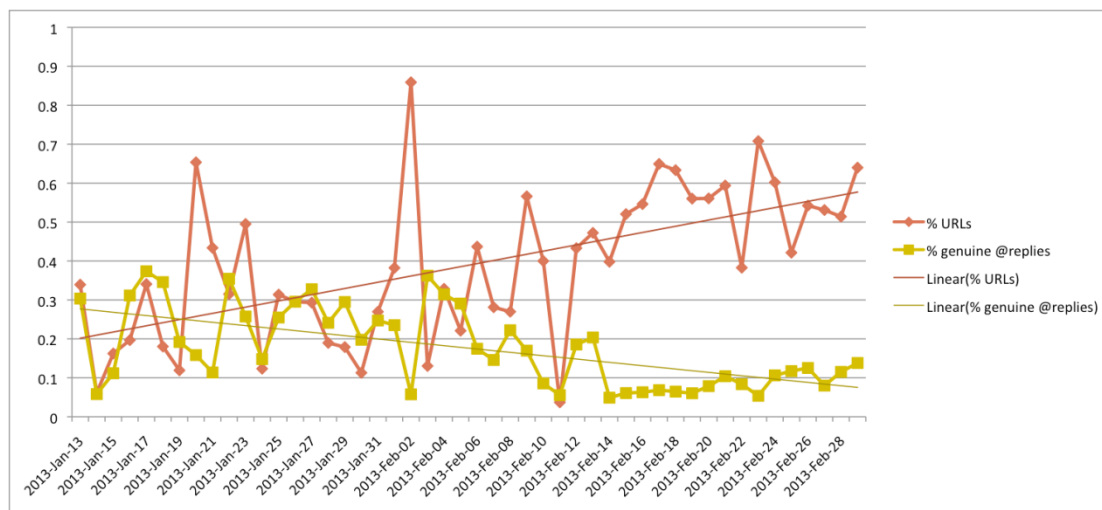
We apply a combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques that intend to capture both semantic and syntactic textual levels. We use data mining methods to analyze which frames are adopted by Twitter users over the two weeks after the shooting. This analysis is grounded in the frame analysis perspective and is different than sentiment analysis. Instead of looking for explicit opinions and sentiments, such as “he is guilty” or “he is innocent”, we showcase through the results how opinions, particularly in controversial discussions, are a complex combination of more implicit symbolic devices such as examples and metaphors repeatedly mentioned.

Frame analysis is a suitable strategy to analyze the meaning-making process that has however rarely been applied on the social media scholarship. Previous studies with traditional media content suggest variables to be analyzed in order to find out how an event is framed, such as cited causes, solutions, examples, metaphors and so on (Entman, 1993, 2004; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Iyengar, 1991; Matthes & Kohring, 2008; Vimieiro & Maia, 2011). We are proposing a novel methodological design

to enable the use of this methodology for Twitter content, especially taking into account its particular features such as length of posts and language uses. The frame matrix proposed by Gamson and Modigliani (1989) was previously tested with another dataset and it proved to be suitable for Twitter conversations because in very short messages users tend to recur to figures of speech and examples rather than to very rational argumentation. For instance, immediately after the incident was first reported, it was seen as a tragedy, with no clear association being made between Pistorius and previous similar cases. Over the following days, many tweets made associations between Pistorius and other Nike athletes recently involved in scandals. This type of association reveals how users on Twitter, an increasingly significant forum for public communication, are processing information and framing the event.

### Results and brief analysis

Nearly 1.5 million tweets were collected from the 13<sup>th</sup> of January to the 1<sup>st</sup> of March 2013. We used *yourTwapperkeeper*<sup>1</sup> to archive tweets using the keyword “pistorius”. As soon as the news was reported, on Feb 14, the conversations followed a pattern similar to Twitter conversations in major breaking news: there were significantly more original messages and retweets than replies. We showcase in the Figure 1 how the proportion of reply messages decreased, while posts with URLs increased over the period analyzed. Users were sharing the news at this point, having the 14<sup>th</sup> more retweets than original tweets. We restrict therefore our analysis to the crisis period following the event.



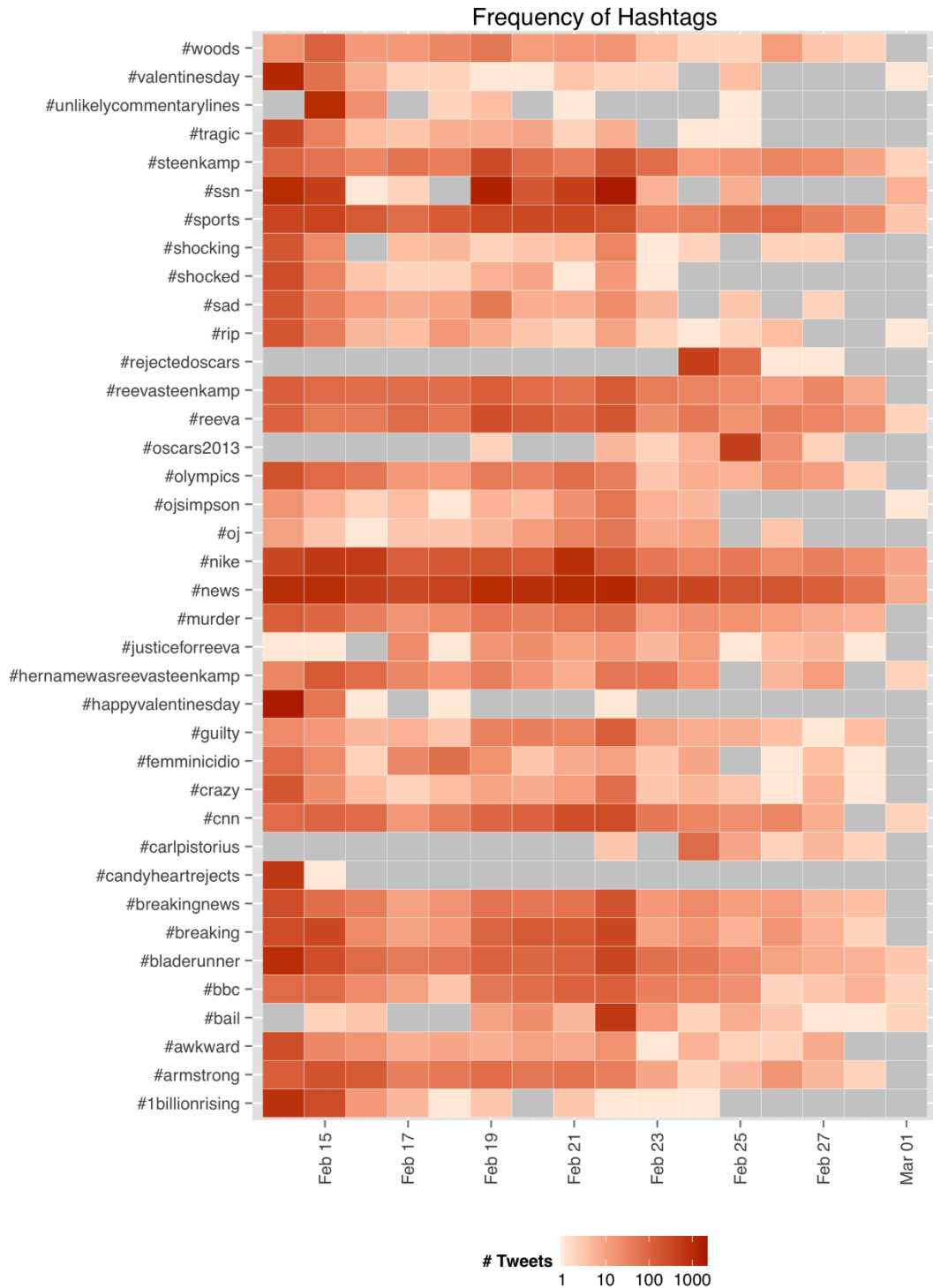
**Figure 1:** Percentage of posts sharing URLs and percentage of posts directed to somebody else (genuine replies) over the days. The script *metrify.awk* created by Bruns (2011) is able to generate those metrics.

We performed a daily analysis of tweeted hashtags. A total of 32,267 unique hashtags were used, being *#pistorius* added to 136,895 tweets – this was the most used hashtag in our corpus. We graphically display the daily frequency of some important hashtags in Figure 2.

We observe in Figure 2 how the story was first framed as a tragedy, since hashtags such as *#tragic*, *#shocking*, *#shocked*, and *#sad* were used more often in the beginning. Also, as the shooting occurred on Valentine’s Day, many users made an association to the date. From the second day, Feb. 15, we observe that the association between Pistorius and other Nike athletes got stronger with specific hashtags being used such as *#woods*, *#nike*, and *#armstrong*. A qualitative analysis of the most tweeted messages at this particular day revealed that many messages mentioned a specific Nike advertisement where Pistorius is metaphorically called “a bullet in the chamber”. Towards the end of the analyzed period, Twitter users talked about Pistorius’ bail and, on Feb. 22, the use of the hashtag

<sup>1</sup> Available at <https://github.com/jobrieniii/yourTwapperKeeper>

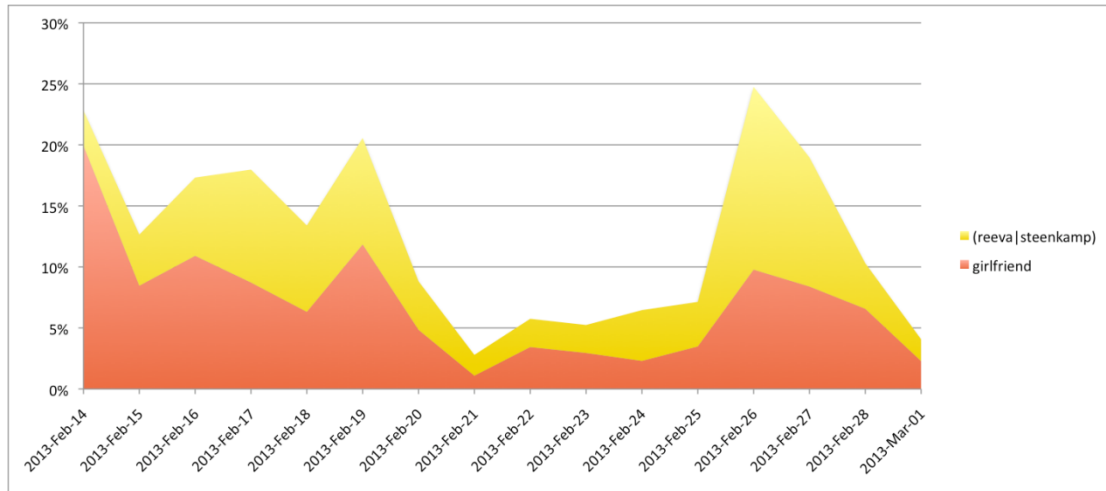
*#guilty* slightly increased.



**Figure 2:** Heatmap generated with R using a selection of significant hashtags.

It is worth mentioning that Twitter users initially framed the case from Pistorius’ point of view and then slightly switched to hers in part of the messages. As we observe in Figure 3, Reeva was referred to as simply Oscar’s girlfriend at first and soon after by her name. This phenomenon is highlighted by the hashtag *#hernamewasreevasteenkamp* (Figure 2), one of the most tweeted hashtags on the second day – *#justiceforreeva* is also significant in the fourth day. The increasing use of her name as opposite

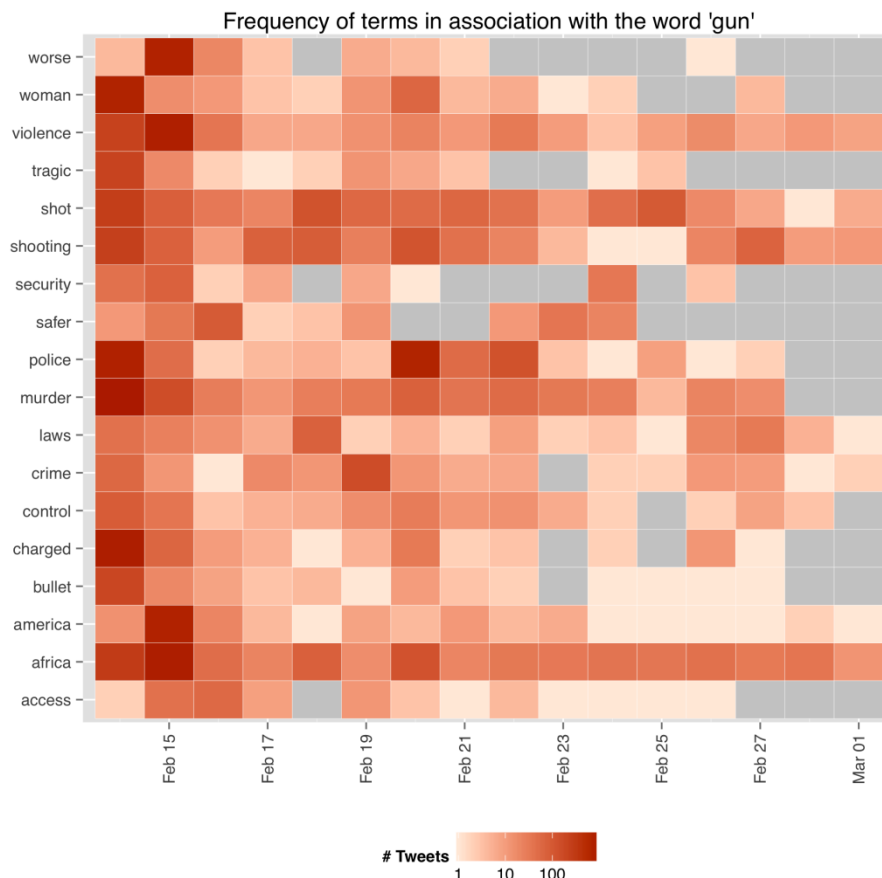
to “girlfriend” coincides with three special events: 1) on Feb 17, when a South African network broadcast her final appearance in a reality show; 2) on Feb 19, date of Pistorius’ bail hearing; and 3) on Feb 26, when Oscar declared his intention to hold a private memorial service for Reevea.



**Figure 3:** Proportional occurrence of “girlfriend” and “reeva” or “steenkamp” over the days.

Figure 4 illustrates how more systemic or social frames come up over the days. In this heatmap, we list words associated with the term “gun” and their frequency. It is particularly significant how “gun” is more or less articulated in a same post with the words “violence”, “laws”, “America”, and “security”. Notoriously, Feb. 15 is not only the day when associations between Oscar and Nike are more often made, but also there is an increase in posts discussing gun violence and gun control issues in South Africa – especially, there was a comparison to America.





**Figure 4:** Level of association between the term “gun” and other words in the same post.

In sum, the issues being discussed over the days showcase how the attribution of responsibility changes according to possible causes wondered for the incident. The episodic frame, when only the event is reported, is characterized for a lack of particular causes and responsible agents (Iyengar, 1991) – at first, nobody knew exactly what had happened. From a tragedy for Pistorius to Reeva becoming the victim in the situation, the messages also highlight how a more personal frame focused on Oscar as the perpetrator turned up, especially from the third day on. The more systemic/social approaches emerged in the second day, notoriously because Pistorius’ life story led users to quickly look for some broader explanations for the shooting.

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## #Pontiff-Ex: The *Twitter* Community's Reaction to the Papal Resignation

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### Abstract

In this paper, we provide an account-centric analysis of the tweeting activity of, and public response to, Pope Benedict XVI via the @pontifex *Twitter* account(s). We focus our investigation on the particular phase around Pope Benedict XVI's resignation to generate insights into the use of *Twitter* in response to a celebrity crisis event. Through a combined qualitative and quantitative methodological approach we generate an overview of the follower-base and tweeting activity of the @pontifex account. We identify a very one-directional communication pattern (many @mentions by followers yet zero @replies from the papal account itself), which prompts us to enquire further into what the public resonance of the @pontifex account is. We also examine reactions to the resurrection of the papal *Twitter* account by Pope Benedict XVI's successor. In this way, we provide a comprehensive analysis of the public response to the immediate events around the crisis event of Pope Benedict XVI's resignation and its aftermath via the network of users involved in the @pontifex account.

### Keywords

*Twitter*, celebrity, crisis, Pope Benedict XVI

### Papal tweeting: a one-way street

The creation of the @pontifex *Twitter* account(s) (there are nine accounts in different languages) in December 2012 placed Pope Benedict XVI in the company of other political and community leaders and celebrities who employ *Twitter* as a tool for managing their public presence, from Barack Obama to Lady Gaga. The foray into online social networking was seen as the signal of a renewed push by the Roman Catholic Church to improve its public relations activities at a time of persistent crisis, in an institution affected by scandals over sexual abuse by priests, the leaking of sensitive documents by the Pope's personal aide, and allegations of money laundering against the Vatican Bank (AFP, 2013).

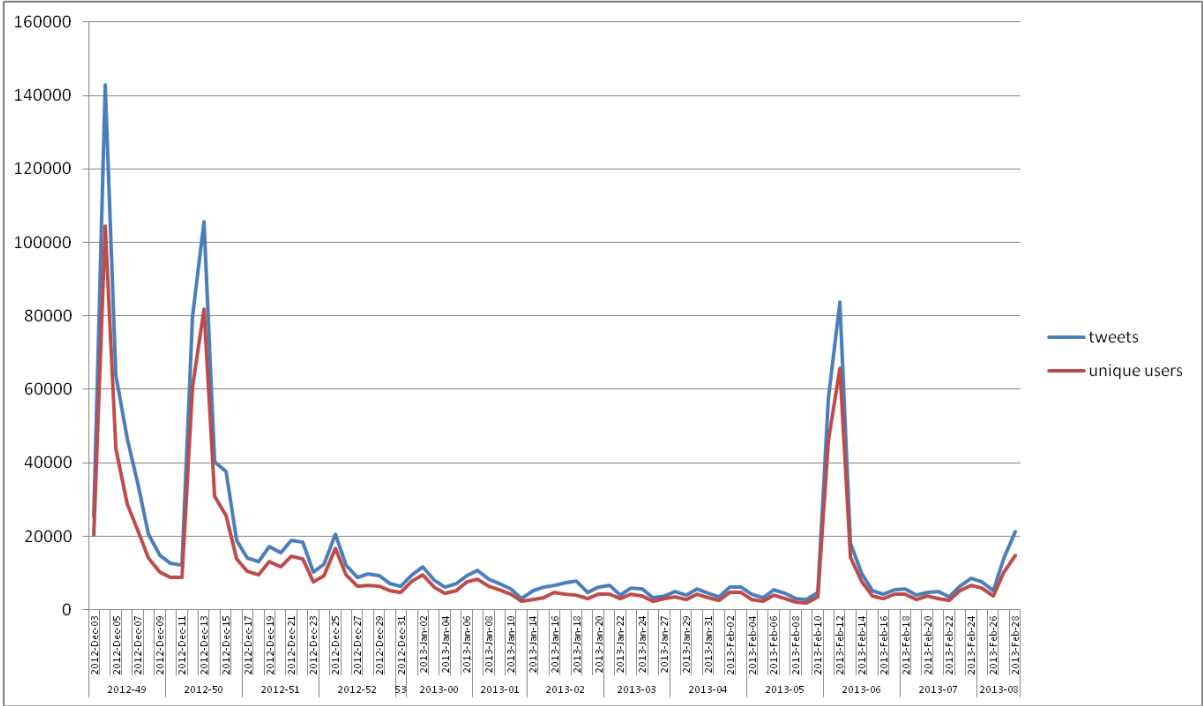
While the papal accounts rapidly attracted a substantial number of followers (some 1.6 million *Twitter* users followed @pontifex by 28 February 2013, while Spanish-language version @pontifex\_es attracted nearly 750,000 users; the Latin @pontifex\_ln had more than 26,000 followers), and received a very substantial number of @mentions since its inception, communication between followers and account holder was limited to a one-way channel; the Pope (or his aides) posted 28 tweets between December 2012 and February 2013 that constituted 140-character prayers or blessings such as "May we defend the right of conscientious objection of individuals and institutions, promoting freedom and respect for all" (7 Jan. 2013). The tweets were posted simultaneously and in (sometimes grammatically incorrect) translation by all nine papal accounts. However, there was no use of @mentions or retweets in any such messages, and the papal accounts followed only each other, rather than connecting with some, or all, of their additional followers. This limited use of the communicative affordances of the *Twitter* platform is perhaps unsurprising, given the nature and status of the papal role, even if the accounts of other world leaders have demonstrated that different communicative strategies are possible for such celebrities (or their media teams) (see e.g. Marwick and boyd, 2011; Page, 2012; Waters and Williams, 2011).

**An account in crisis: analysing the public response to the papal resignation via *Twitter***

In light of the limited tweeting activity by the Pope himself, what is of greater interest is the public resonance of his accounts. In addition to the initial public reaction to the creation of these accounts, a particular focus here must be on the response to the virtually unprecedented act of the Pope’s resignation, announced on 11 February and enacted on 28 February 2013. This paper explores user reactions to the resignation as they are expressed in tweets mentioning or replying to the papal accounts, with particular focus on the most prominent, English-language account @pontifex. Drawing on standard methods and metrics for *Twitter* analysis (Bruns & Stieglitz 2012; 2013), we chart the total volume of user participation around the @pontifex account, and explore patterns of activity over time as more information about the resignation came to hand. Additionally, we use automated content analysis, social network analysis, and qualitative textual analysis techniques to examine the key trends in the popular response. This combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies enables us to complete a comprehensive analysis of the communicative activities and types of connections that characterised the short life of the @pontifex account.

*Quantitative analysis*

Our analysis is based on a dataset which contains all tweets from, as well as @mentioning, the nine papal accounts collected via the open source tool *yourTwrapperkeeper* (on methods used to capture tweets, see Bruns and Burgess, 2011; Bruns and Stieglitz, 2013; Bruns & Liang, 2012). First, quantitative analysis enabled us to generate basic overall perspectives on the public resonance of these accounts. For example, Figure 1 shows the total volume of tweets and total number of unique users @mentioning the @pontifex accounts from 3 Dec. 2012 to 28 Feb. 2013. It reveals that there were major spikes in activity around the announcement of the papal accounts on 3 Dec., the Pope’s first tweet on 12 Dec., and the resignation announcement on 11 Feb. 2013. This suggests that public reactions to the @pontifex account proliferate around events, not particular tweets, and is indicative of the disconnected character of the tweets produced via the @pontifex account; they do not relate directly to the offline activities of the Pope or to current affairs. The fact that no official tweet went out via the @pontifex account to announce or comment on Pope Benedict XVI’s resignation attests to this.



**Figure 1:** tweets and unique users @mentioning the @pontifex accounts, 3 Dec. 2012 to 28 Feb. 2013.

### *Qualitative analysis*

Further in-depth analysis of tweets by the users who most frequently @mention the account enables us to classify these users as one of a number of types (ranging, for example, from believer through critic to retweet bot), and allows for a differentiation of *Twitter* resonance across these different respondent categories. We use automated and manual content analysis of a sample of the tweets by such user groups to examine the key themes highlighted in their tweets, especially in the context of the papal resignation. We explore overall sentiment towards the Pope and the Church, and examine the presence of key themes related to current issues in the Church (e.g. sexual abuse, celibacy, internal governance, the decline of faith, etc.), in order to assess whether the @pontifex account(s) have been able to achieve their assumed aim of connecting with the faithful, or have served mainly as a lightning-rod for critics of the Church. We undertake this analysis from a dynamic perspective, tracing the evolution of public sentiment towards the papal resignation from the first rumours on 11 February to the formal commencement of the *sede vacante* period on 28 February.

Finally, we also aim to examine *Twitter* activity around the papal accounts during the interregnum and in the wake of the election of a new Pope in March and April 2013. With the commencement of *sede vacante*, all tweets posted by Benedict XVI were removed from the nine papal accounts, and stored in archives on the Vatican's official news Website (News.va, 2013a); a related statement noted that "@pontifex will be inactive during the interim period between the renouncement of Pope Benedict XVI and the election of his successor" and that the account would "be available for use by the next Pope as he may wish" (News.va, 2013b). This, however, has not stopped other *Twitter* users from continuing to @mention the account (as an alternative to referring to Benedict XVI by name, or to the office of the Pope in general); through in-depth quantitative and qualitative analysis we intend to examine the overall patterns and tenor of such @mentions. This may reveal the use of *Twitter* to follow news updates ahead of and during the papal election, track the ongoing evaluation of Benedict XVI's legacy, and/or highlight debates about emerging candidates for the papacy.

### **Conclusion – a case study for public communication around celebrity crises**

This account-centric (as opposed to hashtag-centric) study of *Twitter* activities around a major celebrity presence provides important insights into the public resonance of leading celebrity accounts, and especially enables an understanding of how the *Twitter* userbase reacts to significant celebrity crisis events. The papal resignation offers a case study which can be usefully compared with the other celebrity crises covered by this panel. The public response to the immediate events around the crisis and its aftermath via *Twitter* reveals the way in which the social networking site is enrolled in the negotiation of public crises by online users. As such, our study makes an important contribution to generating an understanding of the increasing techno-social hybridity of modern public spheres.

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## The Spokesperson Syndrome: Negotiating stance in the German govt. press secretary's Twitter

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### Abstract

Social media platforms such as Twitter are increasingly sites of current political debate and a relevant source of information for journalists. Politicians recognize this and increasingly flock to social media platforms to communicate and connect to their constituents. In this paper we examine the activity surrounding the official account of the German government's press secretary, Steffen Seibert (@RegSprecher). Specifically, we examine how Seibert communicates with different stakeholders and negotiates between different roles in his capacity as the government's spokesperson, disseminating official information, responding to criticism and expressing views which are expected to balance a degree of personal involvement with official policy. We analyze the stance and positioning of the press secretary and his interactions with other Twitter users, as well as the kinds of messages directed towards @RegSprecher.

### Keywords

twitter; social media, politics, germany, stance

### Introduction

Social media platforms such as Twitter increasingly act as sites of national political debates, as a growing number of politicians, journalists, activists and lobbyists, but also countless private citizens disseminate information, promote views and voice their opinions on a range of issues, reaching from fiscal policy to climate change and from immigration to government corruption (Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013, Burgess & Bruns, 2012). While the emergence of a truly networked public sphere (Benkler, 2006) remains under dispute, different forms of political activism and policy disputes take place on Twitter, and government institutions increasingly use it not only to point to information, but also to respond to questions, comments and criticism.

### Method and data

In what follows we present an exploratory analysis the German government's press secretary's interactions with other Twitter users, relying on a data set collected between June 2012 and February 2013. We collected the tweets posted by @RegSprecher and those of other users directed at him or mentioning him. Table 1 summarizes the information collected, as well as basic statistics describing the formal properties of tweets (whether they contain an @USERNAME to address another user, whether they constitute a retweet, whether the tweet contains a URL, or whether the tweet is a question; cf. also Bruns & Stieglitz, 2013).

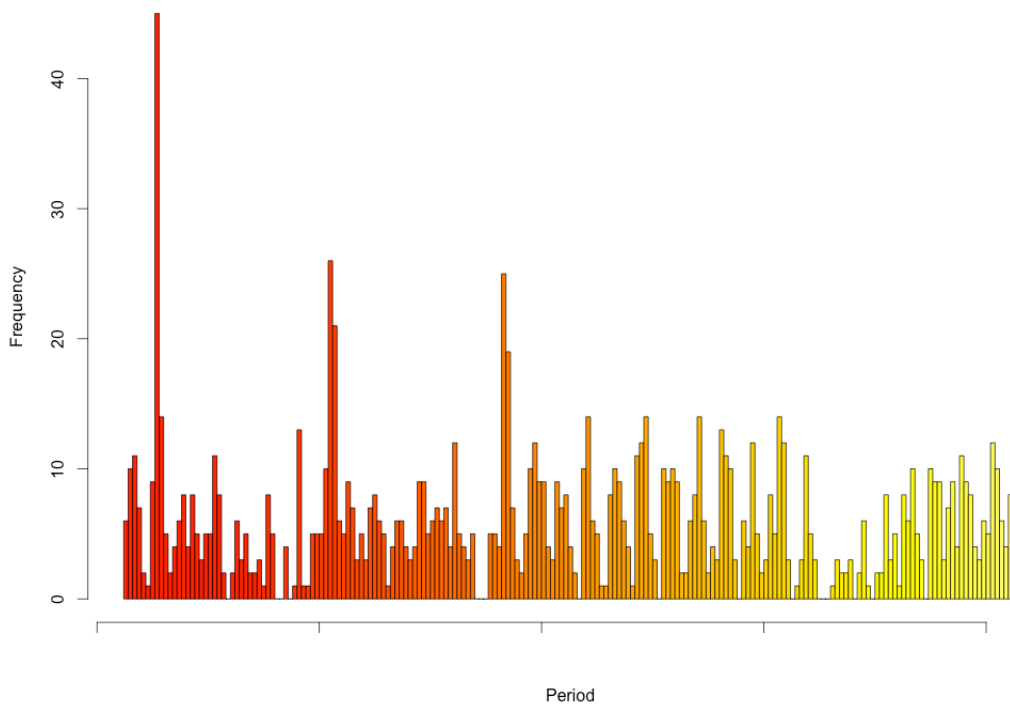
**Table 1:** Summary of data collected on the activity of @RegSprecher and tweets of users addressing or mentioning @RegSprecher.

	Tweets	@USER	Retweets (%)	URLs (%)	Questions (%)
By @RegSprecher	1.189	369 (31%)	149 (12.5%)	681 (57.3%)	35 (2.9%)
Directed to or mentioning @RegSprecher	24.001	---	10.570 (44%)	10.298 (42.9%)	6.702 (27.9%)

Our methodology carries some restrictions. While we collected all tweets by @RegSprecher, only tweets directed at or mentioning @RegSprecher were collected from other users, which is likely to influence the other statistics to some degree.

### **@RegSprecher: Disseminating information and responding to questions**

The figures provided in Table 1 reveal that the main objective of @RegSprecher is to disseminate information on ongoing government activities, both through press releases and other documents posted on the official website of the German government ([www.bundesregierung.de](http://www.bundesregierung.de)) and the websites of different ministries (e.g. finance, defense, education). In addition to this we found links to the regular video podcast of the chancellor, syndicated through YouTube, and pictures, usually taken at official events. Political parties, corporations, NGOs and other non-governmental organizations are only linked to rarely and in ways which aim not reflect endorsement or are likely to be seen as uncontroversial (e.g. [redcross.org](http://redcross.org), [nobelprize.org](http://nobelprize.org)). There are some occasions where the account links to news outlets, but only where a representative of the government is interviewed.



**Figure 1:** Histogram of Twitter activity of @RegSprecher.

Beyond disseminating information, @RegSprecher also engages with users on different levels. This includes responding to questions and reacting to criticism. In the excerpt provided below (in translation) @RegSprecher responds to the user @Wildrose211 who asks a question related to the government’s energy policy in the context of a Twitter-based debate with the minister for environmental issues (@peteraltmaier). Two other users add criticism (to which he does not respond), both quoting RegSprecher’s use of the term ‘infinite resources’ and the second referring to a controversial development project, *Stuttgart 21* (#s21):

*Wildrose211:*

*@RegSprecher @peteraltmaier It used to be that coal was the gold of the Earth, what is today?*



*RegSprecher:*

*.@Wildrose211 Please ask live tomorrow! Gold as a metaphor is no longer useful, in the future we need resources that are infinite.*

*Knorz100:*

*@RegSprecher @Wildrose211 infinite resources in a finite world?*

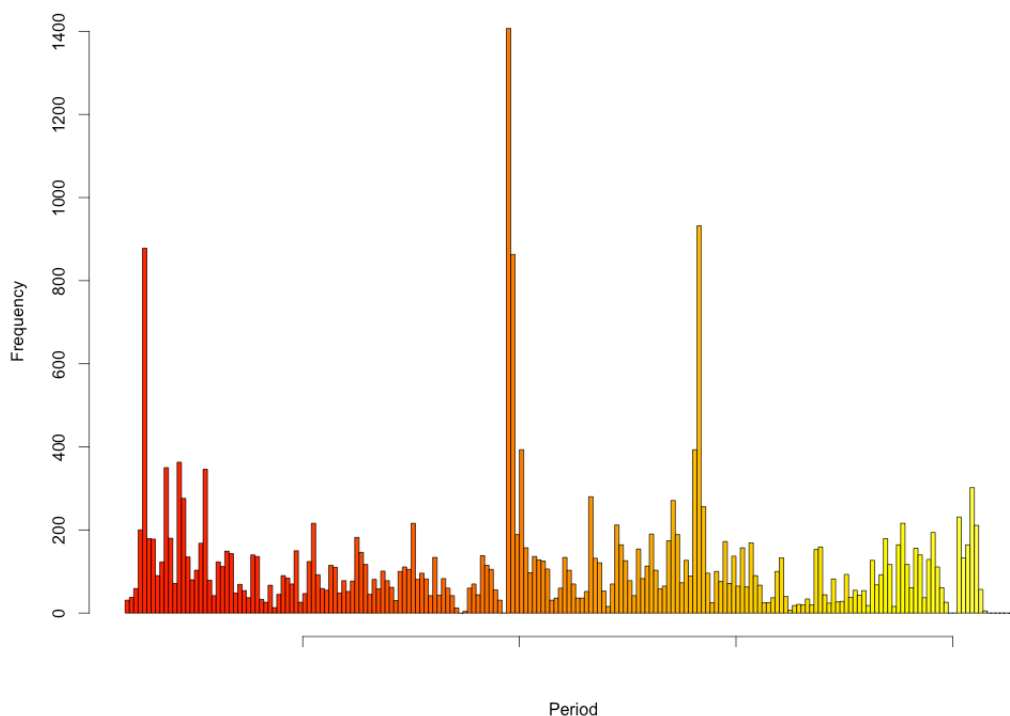
*oldmanjo:*

*@RegSprecher "infinite resources"? Water. Stuttgart has water. Mineral water. Infinite right now. Threatened by #s21.*

Unsurprisingly, a high volume of @RegSprecher's activity in terms of postings tends to correlate with planned events, rather than with breaking news or political controversies. Figure 1 shows the account's activity over time. The three spikes in activity that are visible relate to the debate on energy policy (July 3<sup>rd</sup>), the annual open day of the press secretary's office (August 18<sup>th</sup>) and the festivities at the eve of the Day of German Unity. The responses posted on this day predominantly address the accounts @tdotbpa and @tddebpa which were created by the press office specifically to allow physical visitors of both events to post questions. The fact that restrictions in terms of date, theme, and participants are applied highlights the desire to streamline to communication on the part of the press office.

### **Talking to @RegSprecher: Polemics and clicktivism**

Figure 2 shows the activity of users talking to @RegSprecher. An extreme spike in activity occurred on October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2012, when over 1.800 messages in a variety of different languages were posted by users around the globe urging German chancellor Angela Merkel to "save the world's best bank" (Avaaz.org, 2012a). This was part of a concerted action by civil rights organization Avaaz with the aim of preventing involvement of the Bagladeshi prime minister, Sheikh Hasina, in the governance of Grameen Bank, a non-profit bank supporting development. A very similar situation occurred when Avaaz supporters posted a mass of messages urging the United Nations to recognize Palestine on November 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> (Avaaz.org, 2012b). Both issues were concerned with international, rather than national policy, and led by a single NGO mobilizing its supporters to mass-post a predetermined message as part of a planned clicktivism campaign. On that date a large number of users posted critical – even scathing – remarks on the government's annual report on poverty, which was widely criticized for painting a too positive picture and described by critics as having been censored (Öchsner, 2012).



**Figure 2:** Histogram of @-messages from other users addressing or mentioning @RegSprecher.

An even better impression of how the issues that are framed by @RegSprecher and those addressing or referencing him differ is the use of hashtags in (Table 2). While @RegSprecher uses predominantly names of political leaders (chancellor Angela Merkel, a number of cabinet members, the French president François Hollande), place names (Greece, Europe), and events (#elysee50, #tdot12, #tdde12) other users post a large number of messages with hashtags related to issues from Palestine and the European Financial Stability Measure (ESM) to the Merkel government’s decision to ban the use of nuclear power (#energiewende). Many of these issues can be described as controversial national policy issues, but quite a few also relate to broad foreign policy aspects unrelated to any specific government action (e.g. #yestopalestine).

**Table 2:** Hashtags in the tweets of @RegSprecher and users addressing or mentioning @RegSprecher. Bold hashtags mark controversial issues (e.g. #esm) and affairs (#organspende; an organ donor scandal).

Rank	By @regsprecher		Adressing @regsprecher	
1	#merkel	276	#merkel	2.844
2	#tdot12	36	<b>#yestopalestine</b>	1.129
3	#fragbmu	35	#fragbmu	353
4	#tdde12	30	<b>#refugeecamp</b>	169
5	#westerwelle	25	<b>#esm</b>	165
6	#energiewende	13	#elysee50	155
7	#elysee50	11	<b>#ramadan</b>	152
8	#niebel	10	<b>#schavan</b>	137
9	#syrien	9	#cdu	133
10	#mali	8	<b>#s21</b>	133
11	#sls	7	#energiewende	124
12	#bmu	6	#eu	119
13	#kanzlerin	6	#kanzlerin	107
14	#schäuble	6	#tdot12	103

15	#griechenland	5	#beschneidung	92
16	#hollande	5	#yemen	89
17	#reisesicherheit	5	#erasmus	87
18	#bundestag	4	#bundesregierung	86
19	#bmj	3	#organspende	86
20	#europa	3	#fail	83

## Conclusions

While the German government has recognized the usefulness of Twitter to disseminate information quickly and communicate official policy in a more immediate way than was previously possible through traditional mass media, reacting to thousands of messages per day represents a daunting challenge, especially in the age of political campaign clicktivism. At the same time, a growing number of actors, from NGOs to private individuals, enter the social media arena to directly address the government with their questions, their criticism and with a lot of sarcasm, not only to be heard by their elected representatives, but also to be seen by each other participating in a new kind of democratic spectacle.

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